And I the eye of the storm : reading the past/constructing the present in Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *Jazz*.

Thesis

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AND I THE EYE OF THE STORM: READING THE PAST/CONSTRUCTING THE PRESENT IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS *BELOVED* AND *JAZZ*

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Abstract

This work analyses two novels by the Afro-American novelist Toni Morrison by employing critical tools from diverse fields such as structuralism, narratology, psychoanalysis and philosophy.

The Introduction posits some problems in relation to the analysis of the concepts of race and gender from a feminist perspective. Chapter 1 is dedicated to story and memory in *Beloved*. Chapter 2 analyses narration and the 'jazzy' prose style of *Jazz*. Chapter 3 is an interpretation of the time-space and power concepts as discussed by Heidegger, Foucaualt, and Bakhtin. The conclusion summarises in short the dissertation.

CONTENTS

Introduction

A good many people, I imagine, harbour a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it, pondering its particular, fearsome, and even devilish features. To this all too common feeling, institutions have an ironic reply, for they solemnise beginnings, surrounding them with a circle of silent attention; in order that they can be distinguished from far off, they impose ritual forms upon them.

Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language"

The significant impact of race upon different social theories and practices is a universally acknowledged truth. Though as a concept it has been theorised on different levels throughout the history of human civilisation, nowadays it is still misunderstood or applied in dubious contexts. The reason for the misuse of the concept of 'race', one may argue, is embedded deeply into the predominant ideologies and the inherent, long-standing biologic essentialism in them.

The establishment of feminism as a new cultural and social critique required a theoretization of the existing opposition between men and women in society and, therefore, operated predominantly with the concepts of 'gender' and 'class'. The feminist theories of the 1980s and 1990s pay tribute to the concept of 'race' as well, although this concept has always been among the main analytical tools in Afro-American feminism. The interest in the cultural construction of the race concept can be traced in recent debates between Western feminisms on the one hand, and Afro-American, African, Caribbean, 'Third World' feminism on the other.

It is obvious from these debates that there are intrinsic differences between women that can be described effectively only if the concept of race and ethnicity enter feminist discourse too. There is also ever-growing

awareness of the importance of issues like sexual orientation, geographical situatedness, education, etc., which could make the picture of contemporary womanhood even *more* ethical and encompassing in its content. Culturally and historically inscribed differences proliferate among women themselves, and these diverse aspects can be analysed only through persistent intellectual dialogue on the levels of theory and cultural practice simultaneously.

Feminist critics analyse the underlying tensions in the race discourse, very often considering the triple conceptual relation Race-Class-Gender. The attempt of most feminists is namely to produce a reliable account of the biologic essentialism, and also to challenge the 'absolutism' which was culturally constructed and well-hidden in the concept. However, certain discrepancies very often arise among feminists themselves who are supposedly working towards common goals, namely the cleansing of society of obsolete sexist thinking. The reason for these discrepancies can be related again to their belonging to different schools of thought, and/or ethnic origins, and/or geo-political locations, etc.

But actually is there a possible reconciliation and deletion of one's /though culturally inscribed/ racial identity? What can different feminisms do nowadays in terms of elucidation and emancipation of the 'race' concept? It is my belief that the problems of women of different ethnicities could be interpreted in a humane, though not in all-encompassing way, without denigration and humiliation of the "second sex" which, again, "is not one"?[1]

The specific play of gender and race seems to be even more pronounced in modern literature. And in the study of literature, as succinctly defined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "race has been an invisible quantity, a

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[1] The pun is obviously referring to two classic books of feminism, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Lucy Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

persistent yet implicit presence."[2] Obviously at the end of the century we can observe in feminist literary criticism a shift from an interest in the abstract, monolithic *woman* to multiple and constantly changing women's experiences within divergent ethnicities and cultures. In the context of postmodernity, traditional masculine literary criticism and feminist criticism, which defies the acknowledgement of diversity among women, are predestined: the politics of isolation set forward the feminist quest for the woman's place in patriarchal society in the past; the politics of recognition of multiplicity in ethnicities and cultures calls for a broader perspective and interpretation of different "situatedness-es" among women.[3]

The purpose of my work, then, is to pose the question of how historical and cultural constructs like 'gender' and 'race' are inscribed in the individual standpoint, and what is the related range of possible "translations" of these two ideologems in the specific idiom of two novels by the Afro-American novelist Toni Morrison. However, before launching into a prospective feminist analysis, it is necessary to define my own position here as one of a white, Southeast European woman with long-standing interests in contemporary American literature by women writers in general, and Afro-American writers in particular, and a recent affiliation to the ideas of feminist literary theory.

The indisputable affinity between Afro-American feminism and Afro-American literature by women is often seen as a constructive starting point in literary analysis. Yet there are still certain debates in American literary criticism over the issue of who can actually produce an authentic account of black women's lives by analysing literary texts. On the one hand, a number of

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[2] H. L. Gates, Jr., 'Writing "Race" and the Difference it Makes' in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.2

[3] See, for example, recent works by Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Barbara Christian, Nellie McKay, to name just a few of the critics who advocate the importance of understanding the idiosyncrasies of ethnicity in order to understand the positioning of 'Other' women.

Afro-American critics suggest that only black feminism can effectively articulate a comprehensive interpretation of literary works by black authors. On the other, traditional Western feminism still underestimates the importance of feminist output of Afro-American authors. For me both approaches seem debatable; it is my belief that any open-minded feminist critic can get deep into the problems which Afro-American women encounter but only through a clear-cut personal standpoint and a very rational attempt at internalising the intrinsic diversity and specificity of the Afro-American culture.

In this sense the purpose of my dissertation will be an attempt at formulating an understanding of Morrison's novels *Jazz* and *Beloved* as an embodiment of Afro-American feminist thought. I will try to outline the possible repercussion and references to white women's lives, since an ever-increasing number of scholarly works analyse recently the inherent essentialism in interpreting 'whiteness' versus 'colour'. However, a crucial reinterpretation of basic concepts in the Afro-American feminist thought cannot be within the scope of this work. The obvious emphasis in my analysis will be on the cultural interplay of race and gender, and the formation of black woman's subjectivity in a controversial period in American history, namely, the period of post-Civil War Reconstruction until the 1930s as depicted by Toni Morrison in her novels.

In the Introduction I will discuss the concepts of race, gender, and class as cornerstones of black feminist thought and their importance in the shaping of a critical understanding of contemporary novels by Afro-American authors. By briefly theorising the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism that is especially appropriate in the interpretation of her novels, I will try to illustrate how useful is the utilisation of Bakhtin in the reading of Morrison.

The problem of narration and the importance of voice will be analysed in Chapter 1. The intricate play of narrators' voices and characters, and the

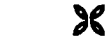
decoding of the dialogic quality of the text entails an interpretation of *Jazz* in terms of polyphony. I will argue as well that both *body* and *voice* construct the special locus of difference in society at large, and also have their particular roles in the power discourse inscribed in literature.

Chapter 2 will focus on the story and Sethe's character in *Beloved*. My hypothesis will be that the polyphonic novel is a generator of contesting *stories* and varieties of *interpretations* too. In this respect my point will be to analyse how story -- a mere account of time/space co-ordinated events -- transforms into history -- the politicised accounts of phenomena that always have particular addressees. What is interesting for me in this process is the new positioning of the Afro-American woman in society and her role as an agent in the practical redefinition of history.

In Chapter 3 I will dwell on the concept of time-space in conjunction with the concept of power, as discussed by Heidegger, Foucalult, and Bakhtin, thinkers with different scholastic affiliation, who share similar points of view as for the impact of space-time and power upon human life. I will try also to pinpoint the ideas behind the notion of 'circular Time', which is deeply embedded in the reading of *Beloved* and *Jazz*. 'Linear Time' and 'circular Time' complement each other, so that myth and history merge into a complex unity. My emphasis will be also on the chronotopes of the past which contest and shape the experience of the present, with a simultaneous reference to the future. It is worth mentioning here that, in Morrison's novels, black women's subjectivities never truly 'dissolve' in this temporal fluidity, i.e. they maintain their integrity in the ultimate test of time because they powerfully oppose and defer social constraints, by paying insurmountable private price.

The methods and approaches that I will use in the dissertation come from different sources in literary criticism and cultural theory. Since both novels are extremely open to interpretations on various levels, I find it appropriate to employ adequately varied array of analytical tools in my

analysis. For instance, the narratological models from the work of Rimmon-Kennan and Lanser will be utilised in the discussion of narration, story -- plot development, focalization, embedded narratives, transgression across narrative levels, etc., while the basic concepts from Bakhtin's theory of the novel -- dialogism, polyphony, the chronotope -- together with their feminist interpretation by Pearce, Glazener, Wills will be applied to the content analysis of *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Feminist approaches to literature will help me further deconstruct the culturally inscribed dichotomies in the concepts of gender and race, but still I find it difficult to apply selectively only one of these approaches, be it 'Western' or Afro-American one. The purpose of the dissertation then is to pose the question how historical and cultural constructs like 'gender' and 'race' are inscribed in the individual's destiny, and what is the related range of possible "translations" of these two ideologems in the specific idiom of a literary text which, although written by an Afro-American woman and targeting a very particular audience, addresses greater variety of reading women.



'Race' and 'gender' are pivotal notions in Afro-American feminist thought. As such, their interpretations focus the need for articulating black women's social positions in a society with still dominant patriarchal remnants. While Afro-American feminism is undoubtedly a *feminist* praxis, and, therefore, one might be tempted to simply put it under common denominator with *any* other feminism, the approach to the concept of race remains a problematic issue which further dichotomises the shared theoretical grounds between traditional Western feminism and black feminism. In this sense, the struggle of a significant number of black feminist theoreticians is to establish an autonomous field within feminist studies which will account for the

idiosyncratic experiences of black women. For example, Patricia Hill Collins claims that:

> ... Black feminist thought consists of specialised knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it.[4]

Though the claim of total autonomy is quite a debatable one, we may see the logic in it: for a long time the first and second wave feminisms were predominantly occupied with definitions of the concepts of 'gender' and 'class', and the place of the woman in a patriarchal society. The most important dichotomy to be deconstructed at that point was masculine/feminine, while feminism as a social critique needed one unified subject (though an abstract one) -- namely, *the* woman/women -- who can be emblematic of the anonymous *women* in the battle for recognition in society and political emancipation.

Yet the obvious, real-life differences among women of diverse ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds have long since called for certain changes in the theoretical approach and use of the term 'woman'. The monolithic figure of the 'Woman' as a trope in feminist discourse is to be replaced nowadays by figures, subjects, subjectivities, standpoints in *theories of feminism* writ large. We may relate this need for deconstruction of abstract universality to the postmodern *collage* reality: the notion of the individual's integrity is giving in to the notion of the multidimensional persona of mosaic singularities which is in complex, I am even tempted to use the adjective

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[4] P.H.Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. London: Routledge, 1991, p.22

'Protean', relations with other personae of the same rank. One point in favour of the necessity for deconstruction of the smug universality hidden in the mythic, quintessential 'Woman' is the danger of even deeper fossilisation of obsolete models which, speaking metaphorically, freeze the individual's flexibility in the social context. As the feminist literary critic Barbara Christian argues:

Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism because one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity. Inevitably, monolithism becomes a metasystem, in which there is a controlling ideal especially in relation to pleasure.[5]

In this respect, the ethnic diversity of women is one of the basic issues to be taken into consideration in the analysis of their place in the structure of social power discourses. However, I would like to question the beneficial aspect of the total 'isolationism' which some Afro-American feminists claim to be a source of true emancipation for black women. No doubt, black women only can have the opportunity of looking and speaking about black women from *within*, from a very advantageous "insider's" perspective. But here is also the place to promote the positive potential in what I would call "sharing space in theory" /unaware that, maybe, somebody had already coined it well before me/. In my opinion, the integration of perspectives and the generating of knowledge about the *other*, in the particular case the *other woman*, are the possible ways towards tolerance and understanding of the *different*. Thus, we can escape the risks of persistently naming and treating somebody, or something for that matter,

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[5] B. Christian, 'The Race for Theory' in *Gender and Theory*, ed. Linda Kauffman. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 232

'other', as a sign of obsolete feminist practices. Instead, the shift will be towards coming to terms with the different and learning to empathise with its many embodiments. Just like Judith K. Gardiner points out:

I saw the concept of empathy as central to understanding such relationships because it is the mental process through which we can understand -- and begin to care about -- the thoughts and feelings of other people...In my view, empathy should allow one to understand the constraints endured by other women, not to assimilate their experiences to one's own.[6]

I would like to connect the concept of empathy, as conceived by Gardiner in a broader social context, to the concept of dialogue, the "indispensable item of vocabulary for negotiating the complexities (and apparent contradictions) of a deessentialized feminism."[7] Taking its lead from the works of the well-known Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin /1895 - 1975/, the concept of dialogism and Bakhtinian theory as a whole, as Lynne Pearce points out, is:

... one of the most 'transportable' theories of the twentieth century. It is a category especially in tune with the discourses of the contemporary world (post-1945) discourses of democracy, negotiation, compromise and -- above all -- *difference*.[8]

In feminist literary analysis, the appropriation of the dialogism works ultimately in the direction of this interpretative 'negotiation' through decoding of multivocal attitudes and polymorphous stances especially in the novel:

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[6] J. K. Gardiner, 'Radical Optimism, Maternal Materialism and Teaching Literature' in *Changing Subject*, eds. G. Green and C. Kahn. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 84

[7] L. Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994, p. 100

[8] L. Pearce, *ibid.*, p. 111

actually it offers to the reader numerous perspectives of reading and listening to the varied voices of characters created by women novelists. Combined with empathy and openness to the *different* and its valences, dialogism 'upgrades' the understanding -- an understanding that is "responsive"[9] -- and broadens the interpretative apparatus of the critic to deal with women's writing "which defines its specificity in terms of the positioning of its addressee."[10]

Afro-American women have always had their special place in American society, yet 'special' as a term in this case does not imply 'authoritative' or 'superior'. If we look back into history, it is worth mentioning the already trite metaphor of the 'double burden'. The black woman was always under double pressure: the pressure of a person of colour in a white patriarchal society, which meant being 'owned', 'raped' or 'sold' as property, and the pressure of being a woman in her own community, which meant being 'an outlet for black men's emotions'. Barbara Omolade delineates the origin and the sources of this pressure upon black womanhood, and points out that:

> ... the history of Black women in America reflects the juncture where the private and public spheres and personal and political oppression meet. [11]

The narratives of the complex past of black women decidedly reflect the reasons for the Afro-American feminists' claim of autonomy: that is, the intricacy of individual experiences which merges into the communal experience *par excellence*. A circle within a circle within a circle: the black

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[9] The role of the listener and the response are of particular interest for Bakhtin; see for example 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, pp. 279 - 281

[10] L. Pearce, *Ibid.*, p.107

[11] B. Omolade, 'Hearts of Darkness' in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow et al. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984, p. 364

woman among other black women, among black men, among white women, ultimately among white men. The life of the black woman has always been a real theory and practice of survival, although real life had very little to do with theory in the way most people understand this word today.

Is it strange, then, that the claim for autonomy is in fact a claim for autonomy of the interpretation of the *ethnic* experiences? How can we, the outsider-insiders in relation to the idiosyncratic lives of black women, we, populating different --other -- countries and belonging to different -- other -- cultures, rewrite the different into *differance*[12]; can we 'see' and interpret objectively what is beyond our own /white women's/ experiences? I believe it is possible, since the attempt at interpretation of the culturally *specific* will always have an interpolation -- maybe of modification or variability -- with some aspect of *my* female experience, or with some aspects of other women's experiences in life.

Black feminist theory has always been securely rooted in Afro-American art, and, especially, in creative writing by women. Thus, the relation between theory and practice of Afro-American feminism is one of simultaneity and continuity of ideas, not of disruption of traditions. Since the mid-1970s, the focus in Afro-American feminism is 'field work' in the literal sense of these words. As Barbara Christian suggests:

... people of color have always theorised - but in form quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorising ... is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas see our liking.[13]

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[12] I use here Jacque Derrida's term, implying a difference on a deeper level, i.e. the level of power discourse of signified and multiple signifiers, not simply of schematic dichotomies like black/white/..., masculine/feminine, etc.

[13] B. Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 226

Feminist theory in general is inseparable from the practice of art production, and this is especially true in black feminist criticism. For centuries the voice of black women was "heard" only through the production of outstanding artefacts and creative writing. Hence, literature by *black* women authors, addressing *black* women's issues, is an important forum for the articulation of *black* feminist ideas and preservation of centuries-old oral and literary traditions.

The obvious emphasis that I lay on the adjectives 'black' and 'Afro-American' is both a rhetorical device and a reference to my personal interest in Afro-American feminism. I am very conscious of the delicate balance which I have to strike between the general appeal of underlying concepts in Afro-American feminist theory, and the practical application of these concepts in my own literary analysis of literature by an Afro-American author. What I mean actually is the possibility of a 'smooth' play with concepts which are embedded in a unique ethnic culture, and whose appropriation entails also coming to terms with their gross historical misreading and misuse. That is, I still have doubts about the 'ease' with which I am able to manoeuvre in the domain of Afro-American feminist theory, without stepping unaware into ill-grounded, speculative historicism or romanticising of black experience. For I would like to quote Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who writes that:

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognised to be a fiction ... we speak in biological misnomers and, more
generally, in metaphors. Nevertheless, our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[14]

Race, then, must be a mighty powerful 'fiction', a monstrous cultural coinage, if it took *centuries* of black people's abuse and misuse in the otherwise democratic American society, for " "race" is still a virtually unspeakable thing."[15] What is more, it took *me* /female, white, Southeast European/ approximately a decade to grasp and internalise to certain extent the problematic depths in black women's literature. My point is that although arts, and literature in particular, are absolutely open to diverse interpretations, there is always certain existing balance of what is implied and expressed by the author, and what is perceived and interpreted by the reader, a balance which can be easily turned topsy-turvy in the direction of total misinterpretation.

Once again, authentic feminist thought is nascent in literature. This is especially true of contemporary works by black American women authors who depict the diversity and specificity of black female experiences. The Afro-American writers employ all postmodern literary devices to create works of literature with an equally impressive theoretical input. That is why one can easily find implicit feminist references in contemporary Afro-American literature which are equally strong, if not even stronger, revelations of extremely developed, emancipated feminist thinking.

The epistemological value of Afro-American women's writing is indisputable, and what is more, the abstract and purely theoretical is easily assimilated and internalised by the reader, with a reference to the aesthetic value of the work as well. In this sense, in the acts of reading literature by Afro-American women authors and entering dialogues with them, I see

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[14] H. L. Gates, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 4

[15] T. Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', in *Within the Circle*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, p. 370

exclusive potential for understanding the one who, no doubt on false biologic presumptions, is yet culturally *different* from me.

Although literature is one of the forums of outspoken Afro-American feminism, there are still disputable issues and models to be deconstructed, in order to produce a many-sided picture of black women's lives.[16] This cultural 'remodelling' can be performed by both Afro-American and Western feminist critics who share a similar attentiveness to the problems of reconstituting and repositioning black women in the complex social setting of twentieth-century America, and, most of all, who engage in employing a variety of non-canonical methods of analysis.

The life-long tradition of 'seeing' and treating Afro-American women in terms of "emblematic controlling images"[17] -- as mummies and/or sexual monsters and/or commodities -- deformed the whole process of construction of Afro-American women's subjectivities. The subversion of models and images is one of the main tasks of black feminists writers. This is still an extremely difficult enterprise, having in mind certain racist 'fossils' that corrupt modern society. First, this 'cultural remodelling' must challenge the white patriarchal order which predominantly legitimises the exploitation of the same controlling images. Second, it must defy certain Afro-American patriarchal constraints which, in their essence, are resonant with the white patriarchal laws and arresting practices upon black women. Third, it must question some obsolete postulates of Western /white/ feminism that still operate on the level of the monolithic Woman *per se*, thus working ultimately in favour of the grand patriarchal discourse. Thus, as Morrison clearly states:

In trying to come to some terms about "race" and writing, I am tempted to throw my hands up. It always seemed to me that people who invented the

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[16] For similar claims and eloquent reasoning, see, for example, the book of P. H. Collins.
[17] P. H. Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 70

hierarchy of "race" when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it doesn't suit their purposes for it to exist. But there is culture and both gender and "race" inform and are informed by it.[18]

Another important aim of the Afro-American feminist critics and writers is the construction of self-defined standpoint/s/. Taking into consideration the variability of 'angles of vision', the complex social positioning of black women, and the necessity for adequate textual representations, the literary endeavours and productiveness of contemporary Afro-American authors are creative vents for defining and valorising black female subjectivities. To quote once more Barbara Christian, who writes that,

In literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged.[19]

The novels of Toni Morrison are a perfect illustration of the integration of feeling and knowledge quoted above. I find in them a significant blend of philosophy and *belle letre*, of theory and reality, yet the abstract never takes over the palpable -- a point at which the works of Afro-American novelist and black feminist critics are especially outstanding and appealing for the reading audience. Morrison and writers like Alice Walker, Michele Wallace, Gloria Naylor, Terry McMillan and others portray black women's experience with an exquisite, subtle sense of *timing* and *transitivity* in people: what I mean is that these writers strive after a creation of characters involved in constant search for identities as constituted by time and cultural spaces they inhabit. What was once considered a 'rounded' character in the literature of the canon is

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[18] T. Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Spoken', *op. cit.*, p. 370

[19] B. Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 229

generally giving way to the fluidity and *transitivity* of human experience especially in "feminocentric literature"[20]. Because in the postmodern context, as Homi K. Bhabha claims:

[...] there is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.[21]

Morrison is an outstanding feminist literary critic for women in academe, but, more importantly, her novels have strong feminist resonance among women of different social status in America and around the world. As an Afro-American woman she is very sensitive to the challenging implications in the phrases 'being black' and 'being a woman novelist' in the context of today's America, and, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points in a recent article:

Toni Morrison has frequently stated that she is a black writer first, a writer second, effectively reversing decades of attempts by black writers to make their work "universal" by writing about whites.[22]

For Toni Morrison, the act of writing as a black novelist is inextricable from the act of portraying black humanity at war with historical controversies and anachronisms such as slavery, racial segregation, political disenfranchisement, in short, everything that comprises the "social unconscious."[23] The female characters in her novels, with unique human destinies and an amazing striving to survive against all odds, are an

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20 H. Michie, *Sororophobia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 166

21 H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 1

22 H. L. Gates, Jr., 'Harlem on Our Minds', *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 1, 1997, p. 8

23 D. Cornell, 'What Takes Place in the Dark', *Differences*, 4, 2, 1992, p. 46

embodiment of Morrison's philosophy as an unproclaimed, yet a powerful feminist writer: hers is an art that speaks about black women's experiences to black women, and, some how, most naturally and unobtrusively, to women at large. The art of getting into the depths of these experiences is an art of survival for all women despite the color of their skins, for if Babbitt is correct in her claim, then:

> ... at least some part of the acquiring of adequate understanding consists in the development or bringing about of the right sort of individual or group identities. But part of what is involved in developing the right sorts of identities is consideration of what sorts of capacities and connections -- importantly epistemic ones -- become possible as a result. Some would want to say that the appropriate constraints on identity are purely pragmatic, that is, that what determines what an individual or group should become is just what they need to become in order to achieve some liberatory goals. This ignores the fact, though, that people often have to make commitments and take actions first before they can begin to identify appropriate liberatory goals.[24]

In conclusion, my work will be dedicated to some extent to a descriptive analysis of 'what is in' the two novels by Morrison that makes them readable as literary texts, but such an aim will be of secondary importance, considered against the background of an ever-growing number of literary analyses that deal with particular aspects of *Beloved* and *Jazz*. More valuable, in my view, will be to describe how Morrison structurally operates with literary techniques, specific to the Afro-American prose style, to

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[24] S. E. Babbitt, 'Identity, Knowledge, and Toni Morrison's Beloved: Questions about Understanding Racism', *Hypatia*, Summer 1994, 9, 3, p. 16

achieve greater viability and philosophic depth that are characteristic of her works.

CHAPTER ONE

BELOVED: REMEMORING THE PAIN

Material compulsion, spasm of memory belonging to the species that either binds together or splits apart to perpetuate itself, series of markers with no other significance than the eternal return of the life-death biological cycle. How can we verbalize this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory?

Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*

History, in its scholarly effort to achieve objectivity in telling the story of humankind, cannot adequately pass on the story of human suffering, for suffering is ultimately an individual and subjective experience, having more to do with the realm of the psychological, rather than the factological. It takes somebody – in true suffering -- to pass this story on; it often takes a mother's voice, deformed *through* and *in* suffering itself, transformed into the primal howl of a lawless and chaotic pre-Oedipal state, yet a voice very much in harmony with the core of the suffering. A *chora* [25] out of the core of pain.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* bridges namely that hiatus -- between purely historical representations and representations of historically inflicted suffering -- by encoding in her outstanding novel black women's individual voices telling the story of the unspeakable history of slavery in America.

Since its publication in 1987, Morrison's fifth, Pulitzer-prize winning novel *Beloved* has spurred an enormous wave of critical responses and

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[25] For an especially appealing, pioneering analysis of the concept of *chora*, see *Revolution in Poetic Language* by the acclaimed Bulgarian-French scholar Julia Kristeva, translated by Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

interpretations[26]. Undoubtedly, the most challenging aspect to any critic is the fact that the book rigorously defies hermeneutic foreclosures. As a postmodern novel, *Beloved* is open to various and variable interpretations that invite diverse points of view, each one of them reading the rich text of *Beloved* in its own veritable right. On the other hand, the only perspective that the novel does not accommodate is the facile canonical interpretation of *Beloved* as, simply, a fictional record of slavery. For the novel is undoubtedly much more than that: it throws light upon liminal psychic experiences which position both black men and women on the verges of, and still very deep into, the unbearable, abnormal existence under slavery.

Morrison is particularly interested in the analysis of black women's experiences in the epoch of slavery and immediately after the Civil War (1861-1865), when the abolition of slavery is officially proclaimed countrywide, yet the social realities in the United States -- predominantly in the South, but also in the North – are harshly imprinted with memories from the slave past. The central themes in *Beloved* are the meaning of community and motherhood, the reciprocity between the integrity of an ethnic group as a whole and the status of its female members, and the anachronic existence of two contradictory yet interdependent political, cultural, and ethical structures: of the slave holders and (the missing ideological structures) of the slaves. Morrison pinpoints especially well the respective opposing conceptions of history and memory, reason and irrationality, time and space, property and deprivation, kinship and 'otherness': on the one hand, these concepts as embodied in the panpsychism of the African lore; on the other, the monotheistic beliefs of the Western Enlightenment and modernity. Thus Morrison depicts and encapsulates the significance of the clash between

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[26] At this point I'll name only few of the extremely interesting analyses published recently by scholars like Laura Doyle, Barbara Hill Rigney, Patricia McKee, Roger Luckhurst, Cynthia Hamilton, and so many others.

these two world-perceptions. And, as Paul Gilroy claims in his book *The Black Atlantic*:

The desire to pit these cultural systems against one another arises from present conditions. In particular, it is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practised as a form of political and economic administration.[27]

Read from a humbler, individual perspective, *Beloved* is a novel about the inexorable metastasis of psychological destruction of the human soul, incurred by and proliferating in slavery. However, the larger context of the novel calls forth the concept of modernity, and the vulnerability of the individual in it, and especially the vulnerability of women, which arises from the "sense of the vacuity, the inanity of the present."[28] As Morrison herself points out,

... modern life begins with slavery. From a women's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one

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[27] Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic*. London and New York: Verso, 1993, p. 220

[28] P. Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and Memory Crisis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 4

of the characters says in the book [*Beloved*], "in order not to lose your mind." These strategies for survival made the truly modern person...[29]

Morrison deals with the problem of human survival on two levels, thus bridging the gap between historical narrative and personal story, and creating what I would call a 'psychic history' of slavery. One of these two is the level on which the author makes a subversive record of the history of survival-in-suffering, and relates the communal history; the second level is the level of depiction of survival in the history-of-suffering, that is, each individual's history.

... Morrison scatters her signs, her political insights, and it is only through an analysis of her language that we can reconstruct an idea of the political and artistic revolution constituted in her work. "Confrontational," "unpoliced," hers is the language of black and feminine discourse -- semiotic, maternal, informed as much by silence as by dialogue, as much by absence as by presence. Morrison seems to *conjure* her language, to invent a form of discourse that is always at once both metaphysical and metafictional.[30]

For Morrison, there is no hierarchy between these two levels – her goals are, first, once again exposing slavery as a paramount social evil, and divesting the numerous atrocities towards slaves of their long-standing, victimising anonymity.

The story without

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[29] Morrison, T. 'Living Memory: Meeting Tony Morrison' in Paul Gilroy's *Small Acts*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1994

[30] B. H. Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991, p. 7

The distinction between 'fabula' and 'sjuzhet' made by Russian Formalists[31], or the parallel distinction, between 'story' and 'discourse', as interpreted by Structuralists[32], is a useful starting point in the analysis of *Beloved*. The novel is remarkably rich in complicated story lines and narrative instances, which complement each other to produce a highly encoded text in hermeneutic terms. Thus, *Beloved* embodies an example of what Barthes defines as *textes lisibles*, or readable text, in other words:

...readability (or interpretability) is the power literary texts have of producing meaning , a power achieved by virtue of the reification of literary discourse into "text"...[33]

On the other hand, in *Beloved* Morrison makes a virtuoso play upon the self-contained, writerly text, *le textes scriptibles*; which Chambers aptly defines:

What is the writerly text, indeed, unless it be one that has realised to the fullest possible extent the implications of textual autonomy? ... the writerly text realises the maximum specialisation of text, its highest degree of objectivity...[34]

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31 See, for example, the works of Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Medvedev, and Propp, in which *'fabula'* is interpreted as a series of events, while *'sjuzhet'* is as it is told in the narrative.

32 For example, in the works of Culler, Chambers, Barthes, and Todorov, 'story' is understood as a sequence of actions (the text as narrated), and 'discourse' is a narration of events (the text as narration). In a similar way the famous French narratologist Gerard Genette diistinguishes between 'story' (*histoire*) and 'text' (*recit*).

33 R. Chambers, *Story and Situation* . Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 13

34 R. Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 13

Consequently, we can hardly speak of a *single* story in *Beloved*; it is rather a text of contesting stories which operate upon the principle of embedding[35], or the so-called '*myse en abyme*'.[36] What this means is that different protagonists, events, and stories come alternatively to the foreground at different points in the narration to produce a concentric discursive circles, or subtexts.[37] In this way, as Riffaterre points out:

> From the viewpoint of the text in which it appears, a subtext is a unit of significance. From the viewpoint of the readers whom it helps to perceive and decode the significance of long narratives, the subtext is a unit of reading that is a hermeneutic model... The story it tells and the objects it describes refer symbolically and metalinguistically to the novel as a whole or to some aspects of its significance.[38]

In their functioning, the multiple subtexts evoke the bigger, longer history which is being scrutinised by Morrison -- the history of slavery. Hence, *Beloved* is also a novel which finely utilises the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, in order to evoke the effects of heteroglossic elocution and interlocution, which, again, undoubtedly challenge the racial, monistic discourse of slavery. In this sense 'heteroglossic' means not only multiple discourse, but primarily a discourse implying different social accents and registers. That is how Paul de Man generalises the dialogic concept as,

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[35] A further classification of 'embedding' will divide it into 'narrational' (done through concentric narrative instances), and 'figural' (done through concentric figural usage)

[36] An extremely lucid analysis of the concept is to be found in Dianne Elam's book *Feminism and Deconstruction.* London: Routledge, 1994

[37] The concept of the subtext is discussed exhaustively in Michel Riffaterre's book *Fictional Truth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990

[38] M. Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth,* p. 131

... a double-talk, the necessary obliqueness of any persecuted speech that cannot, at the risk of survival, openly say what it means to say...[39]

This observation is very much to the point in the case of *Beloved,* since the author is dealing with such 'speech-es' under threat: the speech (and story) of Sethe at the cross-road of slavery and "emancipation"; Denver's speech of living in, and coming to terms with, a haunted present; Baby Suggs' "chromatic" speech of psychological healing; Paul D's speech of living with the rusted "thing" in his soul; Beloved's all-consuming and consummate speech in relation to the rest of the characters. In any case, and even more in the case of *Beloved*, as Elaine Scarry assures us, "the introduction of the voice reintroduces multiplicity."[40]

On the other hand, the dialogic framework of *Beloved* also seeks to explore the persistence of the past into the present of the protagonists, since Terdiman defines memory as "the modality of our relation to the past,"[41] while:

Dialogism ... is a memory model. It seeks to recall the semantic and social history carried by a culture's language, but which tends to be forgotten, to be blanked, in characteristic forms of mystification and amnesia...[42]

Morrison uses both ulterior and anterior types of narration[43], which means that in the first instance the narration follows the events, while, in the

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39 P. de Man, 'Dialogue and Dialogism' in *Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 107

40 E. Scarry (ed.), *Literature and the Body* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. vii

41 P. Terdiman, *op.cit.*, p. 7

42 P. Terdiman, *op.cit.*, p. 45

43 See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's work *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.* London: Routledge, 1983, p. 89 - 90

second instance, it precedes the events narrated in order to produce a double impact upon the reader. This impact brings together two equally emphatic aspects of the reader's evolvement with the text itself: first, of being present and partaking of what happens in the present tense of the narration, and second, of obtaining an insider's knowledge about what has already happened to the protagonists. In this way the protagonists in *Beloved* come to life also in a special double mode: of relation to each other, and of relating to the reader *cum* interlocutor. In fact, this 'double performativity' is what Bakhtin calls the existence in the novel of 'I-for-the-other' and 'I-for-myself' because,

> Being is always 'co-being'... To the extent that it always implies self-other interaction, being is always an 'event', an act, since myself needs the other, to become an I-for-the-other, to assimilate temporarily the other's point of view, so that to be an I-for-myself /and vice versa/.[44]

This special double mode will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter 3, since it involves also the special notion of existential *Dasein* as interpreted by Heidegger, as well as the concept of the chronotope in Bakhtin. For the time being, however, it will suffice to point out that, in terms of the characters' interaction and relations in *Beloved*, I-for-the-other, or being-with/being-in-the world[45], is inextricably congruent with the relation between reader and protagonists as well. Through this double mode of representation Morrison is painstakingly (yet powerfully too) investing in her novel a historical outlook upon slavery and, more importantly, an analysis of the psychologically degrading deformations of human beings caused by bondage. By telling the

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[44] P. Morris (ed.), *The Bakhtin Reader.* London: Edward Arnold, 1994, p. 246

[45] P. Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity' in *On Paul Ricoeur:Narrative and Interpretaton*, David Wood (ed.). London: Routledge, 1991, p. 191

story of slavery, and especially of the degradation of black women deprived of their bodies, but still owning their voices, Morrison commences in her specific way the psycho-history of white, unbalanced, modern America. And, as Chambers poignantly assures us:

To tell a story is to exercise power (it is even called the power of narration), and "authorship" is cognate with "authority." But in this instance as in all others, authority is not an absolute, something inherent in a specific individual or in that individual's discourse; it is relational, the result of an act of authorisation on the part of those subject to the power, and hence something to be earned.[46]

Each in its turn, and together in their overall effect, the stories in *Beloved* historicise slavery by means of representationally innovative re-staging of the panopticon of slaves' suffering. What Morrison aims at is exactly to 'estrange' the experience of physical torture and suffering from her literary text, and substitute these two awesome aspects of human degradation in bondage with the depiction of the much more horrible psychic deformation of human soul, since the latter incurs more dangerous, long-standing effects upon the individual's personality. Thus, I would conclude, Morrison does not decipher the trauma of slavery caused from without, for example by a pictorial emphasis upon the brutality of human bondage; quite on the contrary, she is interested in the variety of traumatic experiences held in abeyance in the memory of the survivors -- sometimes against their will, sometimes in accord with their innermost, unspoken needs. For her, as an Afro-American writer, the problem of remembering the 'unspeakable' is an

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[46] R. Chambers, *op.cit.*, p.50

important, decisive step in solving the problem of 'healing from within'. In other words:

When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of psychic survival. To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.[47]

Sethe: Her Story

One has to pass on the story of suffering -- never mind how bitter it is, never mind how many conflicting and subversive stories actually there are. One has to pass it on to ensure the recognition of her/his human existence, since one is both subject *of* and subject *to* history.

Suffering is voiceless in the metaphorical sense that silence becomes a sign of something ultimately unknowable. It implies an experience not just disturbing or repugnant but inaccessible to understanding. In this sense, suffering encompasses an irreducible nonverbal dimension that we cannot know -- not at least in any normal mode of knowing -- because it happens in a realm beyond language.[48]

The articulation of memories of suffering through language, or in the silence of the traumatically arrested speech, is an expedient instance of a

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[47] H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 18

[48] D. Morris, ' About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community,' *Daedalus*, Winter 1996, Vol. 125, Nr. 1

form of self-articulation in modernity, although a number of scholars have long since (rightfully) announced the disappearance of the unified Cartesian self[49]. In Freeman's succinct summary:

Rather than the self being seen as a primary *origin* of meaning, [...], which is how most forms of humanism have tended to conceive it, it is seen instead as being already *enmeshed* in meaning, in language, and is thus more a product or a destination, we might say, than an origin. In any case, the fictionality of the self, from this perspective, is hardly something to lament: the death of the substantilised humanist self, not unlike the (alleged) death of God, can only serve to free us further from the illusory comforts of those modes of thought that repress and bury our own essential heterogeneity and otherness.[50]

In her novel *Beloved,* Morrison explores the loss of the unified self in the specific context of slavery, which deprives men and women of a most simple, innate characteristic -- their humanity. However, the striving after narrating stories of what has happened to the individual, thus "rememoring" the past in its grandiose abnormality is already an attempt to match and "glue" together the bits and pieces of the split self in the present. Precisely, as Rigney makes clear in her recent study of Morrison's works,

Throughout Morrison's novels, women are the primary tale-tellers and the transmitters of history...; only they know the language of the occult and

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[49] I refer here to an extremely diverse group of thinkers; to name just one, French 'strand', including Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and many others.

[50] M. Freeman, *Rewriting the Self.* London: Routledge 1993, p. 11

the occult of language and thus comprise what Morrison has called a "feminine subtext."[51]

The story of Sethe and her atrocious infanticide is only one aspect of the appalling power of the "deep, dark and amorphous"[52] slave past to make a nightmare of the present as well. It is one subtext in the array of subtexts present in *Beloved*, yet it rightfully dominates the narrative space of the novel with its accumulated referential power. The personal history of Sethe is revealed through gradation, fragmentation, and symbolic transference, until it finally stands in a synecdochal correlation to the histories of the invisible millions of African Americans. Thus, as do all of the characters in *Beloved*, Sethe tells at once a private and communal story, a story of slavery and escape into freedom that is still a form of slavery, and which continues to be such for pretty long time in post-Civil War America. It is a quintessentially degrading "succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression, and war."[53] Paradoxically as it might sound, the escape into freedom turns into an escape into a new form of slavery in the present. Thus the present is just as tormenting as the slavery of the not-so-remote 'past', for the present only substitutes physical bondage with an even more rigid social one, in which the haunting ghost of the slavery still precludes the healing normalisation of the ex-slave's psyche. Therefore, in Binswanger's gloss, it is obvious that the present cannot serve as an anchoring 'stabilisator' of what has remained of a maimed soul:

When we are in a state of deeply felt hope or expectation and what we have hoped for proves illusory, then the world -- in one stroke -- becomes

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[51] B. H. Rigney, *op.cit.*, p. 11

[52] M. Freeman, *ibid.*, p.50

[53] B. H. Rigney, *op. cit.*, p. 61

radically "different." We are completely uprooted, and we lose our footing in the world. When this happens we say later -- after we have regained our equilibrium -- that it was "as though we had fallen from the clouds." With such words we clothe our experience of a great disappointment in a poetic simile that arises not from the imagination of any one particular poet, but out of language itself. In this respect language is everyman's spiritual homeland.[54]

Morrison's choice is to get deep into the psychologically coercive forces that make Sethe "fall down from the clouds" of the alluring present, rather than to narrate a story of already too well-known atrocities, which will further /negatively/ romanticise the history of slavery. Thus *Beloved* focuses onto the private transference of the 'impossible' legacy of the slave past into the present, and the dual human need to remember and to forget the memories of that past. As Morrison makes clear, this is an extremely problematic, even threatening need, because it estranges Sethe and the rest of the protagonists from the traditional "moral community"[55] of Afro-Americans in post-Civil War America, who are, naturally, most willing to forget the past, or rather, to turn their backs (literally, maimed backs) to it. As David Morris argues in an article,

Moral communities differ immensely in their beliefs, values, and cohesiveness but they always share a dependence on exclusion... The boundaries of a moral community, of course, are flexible and often paradoxical.[56]

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[54] L. Binswanger, 'Dream and Existence" in *Dream and Existence*, Keith Hoeller (ed.) New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993, p. 81

[55] The term is coined by the philosopher Tom Regan in *The Thee Generation: Reflections on the Coming Revolution.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991

[56] D. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 40

Put in a more poetic language, this particular need brings forth for Sethe and her kin that 'second' kind of loneliness:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind -- wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.[57]

Sethe's ability to face and live through these two kinds of loneliness is undoubtedly the kernel of the novel. As a philosophic focus, this ability bespeaks the ultimate power of the individual to pass master the trial of social exclusion, and, more importantly, to survive the endless trial of 'rememory-ing' one's past. Hence, in *Beloved* we find the recurrent use and play upon the themes of memory, remembrance, forgetting, and -- already -- the chronic 'disability' to forget. An impressive instance of the latter 'disease' is the conversation between Baby Suggs and Sethe:

Baby Suggs rubbed her eye-brows. "My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember."

"That's all you let yourself remember," Sethe has told her, but she was down to one herself -- one alive, that is... As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. (*B*, 6)

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[57] T. Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: A Plume Book, 1988, p. 274. All the quatations will be from this edition, and the page numbers will be given parenthetically after the text.

The hidden aspect of this exchange is the question of the scope of human memory, and whether and how one can re-adjust it, in order to remedy one's psyche. In other words, how do we achieve forgetfulness? This problem is poignantly developed throughout the novel in terms of the (im-)possible suppression of traumatic memories, and the problematic existence they entail for the individual's future. According to Derrida, for example:

> Memory is the name of what is no longer only a mental "capacity" oriented toward one of the three modes of the present, the past present, which could be dissociated from the present and the future present. Memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present.[58]

Morrison demonstrates that there is no placebo effect of forgetting, and, equally, no remembrance can effectively silence a sore memory which sometimes outcries the deed itself. Just phrased in a different, Heideggerian way, this means that,

It is Dasein's running ahead to its past, to an extreme possibility of itself that stands before it in certainty and utter indeterminacy. Dasein as human life *is primarily being possible*, the Being of the possibility of its certain yet indeterminate past.[59] [italicised in the original]

I would like to suggest that the individual voices of the protagonists in *Beloved* are engaged in an intricate dialogue with each other, while

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[58] J. Derrida, 'The Art of Memoires' in *Memoires for Paul de Man*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 56

[59] M. Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*. Translated by W. McNeill, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 12E

constantly 'remembering it all,' and trying to communicate their past experiences to the others, and/or trying to forget the phantoms of the past. Thus Paul D's appearance in the house on Bluestone Road, "as if to punish her further for her terrible memory" (*B*, 6), is a key moment for the decoding of Sethe's hectic existence in 124. She is desperately trying to put up with the trauma of the infanticide, a trauma of which she is both a subject and an object. Like any liminal experience, it both suffocates with its presence and, equally, stifles when not 'there.' In an effort to forget, yet giving in to remembering the act of murder, Sethe contemplates:

[...] resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite?... But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more -- so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping... I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness, not to speak of love. (*B*, 70)

It becomes obvious from the rather extended quotation above that Sethe's memory undergoes allegorical somatic transformation: it has a life of its own, feeding on Sethe's life, drinking the energy which enables her to live in the present. For memory is always a memory of the past which is energised by the clash with the present, and the site of this clash in the case of *Beloved* is the maternal body. Therefore, as Gunn suggests:

... the body one 'has' is open to invasion and interference from the body one 'is'... this body one 'has' is in fact little more or less than the body over which one is so used to exercising some control that one only realises

one 'is' it when it is too late, when it has already started to go wrong and disobey.[60]

Hence, for Sethe as a mother what is at stake is the ability to overcome memory but, paradoxically, without losing it; to survive in and against the re-memories of the past. The resolution of all this bounds her to yet another marginal status of an outsider in a community which learns how to forget. In temporal terms her marginalization appears at the intersection of past and present, thus Sethe is naturally 'immune' to the future, to her "the future was matter of keeping the past at bay" (*B*, 42). I am tempted to connect her 'immunity' again to her slave past which negates any conception of a life beyond the limitation of the very palpable physical present:

But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more. It left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day... Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new... What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut... (*B*, 70)

Most obviously, Sethe's state of mind can be described as a state of hyperamnesia, which in medical language means, "unexpected amplifications or recrudescences of memory, experiences in which mnemonic contents that had seemed annihilated are "resuscitated" and "regain their intensity."[61] In this sense the critical proliferation of traumatic memories in Sethe is an outstanding case of hyperamnesia, since it also directly entails Sethe's problematic relation to the present, in which, after

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[60] D. Gunn, *Psychoanalysis and Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 80

[61] Th. Ribot, *Diseases of Memory*. Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1977, quoted in P. Terdiman, *op.cit.*, p. 198

eighteen years, she is still the isolato stained with her baby's blood. Is it strange that, as Terdiman suggests,

> If life is painful, its integral reproduction in hyperamnesic recollection can hardly transform it into triumph.[62]

One is tempted, then, to interpret Sethe's 'downpour' of memories in terms of the Freudian storage model, which "sees repression as an unconscious psychic defence mechanism shielding victims from knowledge of traumatic events."[63] However, I would argue that this is not the case with Sethe, since, instead of repressing it, she is constantly, although unconsciously, recalling the traumatic experience in the literal sense of the phrase, i.e., embodying it in the language of memory, which helps her out in telling the story of suffering. For example, her recurrent haunting memories of the white boys who have "stolen her milk," thus raping her literally as a woman, and metaphorically as a life-provider for her baby. Or Sethe's memories of Sweet Home, at the same time blood-chilling and cunningly misleading as the name of the place, which only *then and there*, in the farm itself, could produce the delusive effect of family and belonging upon the needy slave's mind. And most of all the memories of Beloved, her enchanted free floating in time and harsh roaming through Sethe's life. In this sense, as Kristeva claims:

> Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components -- that is doubtless a way to curb mourning. To revel in it at times, but

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62 P. Terdiman, *op. cit.*, p. 198

63 P. Ballinger, 'The Culture of Survivors' in *History and Memory*, Vol. 10, Nr. 1, Spring 1998, p. 102

also to go beyond it, moving on to another form, not so scorching, more and more perfunctory...[64]

I would rather discuss Sethe's memory excess and the saturation of the present with the past in terms of a necessary 'naming' in mourning, since Luckhurst states that "mourning requires a proper name, ... a set of reiterable social rituals and a structure of familial memorialisation."[65] Thus, in an act of symbolic baptism, Sethe literally names her dead baby 'Beloved' :

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible -- that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered... (*B*, 5)

Thus, in the act of prostituting her body -- already her *own* body -- Sethe finds also the symbolic voice to name her child: giving away its dead body, yet never 'giving away' its name either to the engraver, or to the appalled (moral) community.

While to certain extent the other two elements of the mourning, the set of reiterable social rituals and the structure of familial memoralisatlon, are still available to Sethe[66], it is very much the coming to /linguistic/ terms with the

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64 J. Kristeva, *Black Sun.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 97

65 R. Luckhurst, ' "Impossible Mourning" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved...*' in *Critique*, Vol. XXXVII, Nr. 4, Summer 1996, p. 244

66 For Sethe, the set of reiterable social rituals can be transcribed in the on-going struggle with the ghost of Beloved, and later with its incarnation, while the structure of familial memoralisation can be traced into Denver's spiritual crash over Beloved, and successful overcoming of it. In an extended 'familial' version, the latter can be related also to Paul D's and Stamp Paid's coming to terms with Beloved.

unnameable ghost that appeases her mind in an exceptionally odd way. On the one hand, this symbolic act of baptism for Sethe means partial reconciliation with the terrorising past, while on the other hand, from that point on, the ghost of Beloved will be easily called forth in the melancholic present, having once undergone the rite of baptism, which transforms 'it' into the *Beloved* one. In other words, as Lockhurst writes,

Rather than acknowledging loss, the ego secretly identifies with the object, thus internalising it. The effect of keeping the absent one present, is to split the ego, with one part now identified with the incorporated object. The self-accusation and public self-vilifications of the melancholic are the result of an interjected identification with the lost object returning to accuse the ego of its negligence.[67]

I would accept this point, and tie it to my interpretation above of Sethe's hyperamnesic state of mind. What finally appears on the surface is namely the recurrent clash of two questions: one is, "What is 'me' now?" and the second one, "What happened to the 'me' in the past?" Both of these questions inject Sethe's life with an existential uncertainty of more complicated nature than the uncertainty of mere physical existence in slavery. In my view what makes her memory so uncompromising and unforgiving is the lack of secure self-anchoring into a meaningful present that can effectively fight back the more dangerous ghosts of the past:

Ghosts are the signals of atrocities, marking sites of an untold violence, a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to the fact of a lack of testimony. A haunting does not initiate a story; it is sign of blockage of

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[67] R. Lockhurst, *ibid.*, p. 245

story, a hurt that has not been honored by a memorializing narrative. The geography of *Beloved* is punctured by traumas that have not been bound into a story...[68]

Thus we explain Sethe's "circling around" the story of her infanticide, and the inability to communicate it to Paul D, or to Denver. Even when she speaks up, assuming the role of narrator in the structure of the novel, Sethe is speaking in a stream-of-consciousness mode, defying narrative schemes of temporal causality, and, as Wyatt argues:

There are no gaps in Sethe's world, no absences to be filled in with signifiers; everything is there, an oppressive plenitude.[69]

Then it is not a mere game of chance that Sethe constantly reminds herself and the rest of the protagonists that there is no way out of rememoring[70] 'things' from the past, the things that could spiritually kill oneself with the immediacy of their phantasmic presence or, equally, with the absence from one's memory. And she says:

What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I

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[68] R. Lockhurst, *Ibid.*, p. 247

[69] J. Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *PMLA*, 1993, Vol. 108, Nr. 3, p. 477

[70] 'Rememoring' as term is used frequently by Sethe, and it is worthwile to use it here instead of 'remembering', because 'rememoring', in my view, denotes exactly that significant, repetitive recollection of memories, and their even deeper embedding into the human mind. Maybe in a somewhat indiscreet narratological veer, I would suggest that 'rememoring' includes exactly the concentric narratorial and figural embedding characteristic of the *myse en abyme* effect. Thus, memories, and especially the traumatic ones, are are always narrated (although not necessarily voiced) in a higly expressionistic language which plays around a recurrent theme/motif; on the other hand, the figural rememoring can be activated by a line of seemingly unrelated objects (figures). The closest term, then, which will match Sethe's 'rememoring' will be 'involuntary memory' in Proust.

did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened... (*B*, 36)

Obviously, Sethe is more of a mediator of memories than a story teller, being a woman still haunted by the past, she is symbolically 'pregnant' with stories of that unspeakable past. But then again, Sethe is preoccupied with the resurrection of a significant loss into the present, therefore she neglects the trivia of what can be deemed 'normal existence' by her community. It will be appropriate to quote again Luckhurst who makes an excellent point by saying that:

Possible mourning is... remembering to forget -- to work through, interiorize, and then pass over. Impossible mourning is forgetting to remember... Those senses, I think, can be seen to be run together in Morrison's beautiful solecism: to disremember. It is a term that clashes together both recall and an active forgetting of that recall... For memories to be disremembered involves a paradoxical act of simultaneous recall and erasure, one that sustains both effects.[71]

The process of rememoring and the obverse process of forgetting are securely interwoven into Sethe's mind, and, I would suggest, also inscribed in her body. In the literal sense of the word, she bears on her back the stigma of the slave past, but, what is fascinating in this, is the different interpretation of the monstrous blot by the various protagonists in *Beloved*. Thus, as Henderson argues:

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[71] R. Lockhurst, *ibid.*, p. 250

If the master has inscribed the master ('s) code on Sethe's back, a white woman and a black man offer her alternative readings of it.[72]

What the others actually see and interpret is lived experience for Sethe: the runaway white girl, Amy Denver, compares the intricate 'design' on Sethe's back to a chokecherry tree; Paul D sees a sculpture, "the decorative work of an ironsmith" (*B*, 17); Baby Suggs compares the scar to "pattern of roses." An interesting common denominator in these three comparisons, or rather poetic simile for the ultimately debilitating slave experience, is their reference to something exquisite and beautiful, void of the 'thickness' of human suffering. Although naturally Sethe cannot see the tree, or the roses, or the sculpture on her back, she carries the imprint of it through life, and it invests every single experience with the shapeless, shadowy presence of painful memories. Thus Henderson claims:

It is the white man who inscribes; the white woman, the black man, and the black woman may variously read but not write. Because it is her back (symbolizing the *presence* of her *past*) that is marked, Sethe has only been able to read herself through the gaze of others.[73]

What *Beloved* makes clear is that there is no stasis, no temporal permanence for any of the protagonists. It seems to me that Sethe is the one who defies most conspicuously any hypothetical possibility of 'being the same', for she is in the process of making herself visible, if not through active

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[72] M. G. Henderson, 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text' in Domna Stanton /ed./, *Discourse in Sexuality*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 321

[73] M. G. Henderson, *ibid.*, p. 321

social performing, then through the gaze of the people closest to her.[74] If Sethe exists on the margins of the margin itself, and still has to survive the proairesis[75] of her life, then she is also, in Carolyn Dean's words, "a self that is discreetly powerful, apparently selfless."[76] Once interpreted as a protagonist in such terms, it will not be difficult to accept Wyatt's opinion who claims that,

The mother figure of Beloved occupies a contradictory position in discourse. On the one hand, Sethe's self-definition as a maternal body enables Morrison to construct a new narrative form -- a specifically female quest powered by the desire to get one's milk to one's baby -- that features childbirth as a high adventure. On the other hand, this same self-definition forecloses Sethe's full participation in language.[77]

In the same way, I find that Sethe's self-definition as a maternal body inscribes her into the realm of the semiotic, pre-Oedipal stage, the stage of the all-embracing, fluid maternal language, which *a priori* defies the language of the symbolic[78]. Thus, in accord with Kristeva's theory developed in *Revolution in Poetic Language,* I consider Sethe involved into a complex psychic process of transformation which already defines her specific way of speaking about the past, or rather of entertaining silence about it:

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74 For various reasons in the different stages of her life, Sethe is seldom among 'other' people from the community, and her very close kins are the ones to exercise that formative gaze on her.

75 *'Proairesis'* (Gr.) According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, these are the choices faced by a tragic hero. My analysis of Sethe's character derives obviously from the classical tradition, although I'm aware of the inherent discrepancies in the particular case. For a detailed analysis of cases of infanticide in antiquity see M. Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

76 C. J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 123

77 J. Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p. 475

78 In 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva', Judith Butler's summary is as follows: "... the paternal law structures all linguistic signification, termed "the symbolic," and so becomes a universal organising principle of culture itself."

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed upon this body -- always already involved in a semiotic process... In this way the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call *chora*...[79]

The "energy quantities" that move through Sethe's body have both physical and social origin, because, on the one hand, they constitute her as a mother, while on the other they position her as a individual in a hostile society, which *a priori* denigrates women, and black women especially. In this way the specific language of the racial mother -- in its purely linguistic dimension, as well as in its bodily performance -- is a subversive act of keeping at bay the violence of a symbolic order that eliminates any possibility of self-constitution and humane procreation. And Morrison acutely points out:

The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis...[80]

Without acknowledging the subject's relationship to the semiotic domain to be an absolutely liberating, 'positive' one[81], we have to admit that for Sethe the appropriation of the semiotic is the only way out of the vicious

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79 J. Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 25

80 T. Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Spoken', p. 381

81 I was kindly reminded by, and absolutely agree with, Dr. Pearce that for adults to inhabit permanently the realm of the semiotic means to live in a psychotic state (Kristeva holds the same as well).

circle of the past which inhibits life in the present too. Thus, being marginalised by the symbolic, Sethe is at least the sole proprietor of the semiotic *chora* which not only voices the maternal cry of pain and loss, but also functions as a viable transmitter of private history.

CHAPTER TWO

JAZZ: SINGING OUT THE PAIN

Therefore, between knowledge and reality, there is an intermediary which permits the meeting and transmutation or transvaluation between the two...The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in becoming. And the mediator of everything is, among other things, or exemplarily, love. Never completed, always evolving.

Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer's Love: A Reading of Plato's Symposium"

Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* /1993/ is seen by many critics as the second part of a prospective trilogy depicting the lives of black people in America at the end of the nineteenth- and the turn of the twentieth-century. The first novel in the trilogy, *Beloved* /1988/, portrays the life of a black family in the years of post-Civil War Reconstruction which, legally, marked the abolition of slavery and the beginning of a difficult process of the Afro-Americans' integration in society. Similarly, *Jazz* depicts the life of another Afro-American family in the dawn of the century, an epoch characterised by rapid social and economic changes in the USA which tremendously influenced the further integration of black people into a highly competitive capitalist society. Published only recently, in 1997, Morrison's latest novel, *Paradise*, touches upon yet another problematic period in the history of America: the 1960s.

As a social critique and a feminist practice, the predominant concerns of Afro-American feminism are the reinterpretation of the history of slavery and the analysis of the phenomena of black women's integration into a social environment hostile toward those of different color. However, the very term

'integration' presupposes *somebody* consciously entering and adapting to the social media. The justified question of Afro-American critics, then, is whether it is possible for black women, for centuries being simply *bodies*, to socially integrate, without first constituting and defining themselves as *somebodies*, i.e. as *some*-bodies "speaking in tongues"[82] which are different from the predominant social discourses?

Through the recognition and the accounts of black women's idiosyncratic experiences, Afro-American feminists challenge the illusion of 'oneness' of black people by critical reinterpretations of the triple historic process at work: of black women's definition of 'self' in the white patriarchal culture, and also in the black ethnic community , which is a community of men *and* women. Thus, as Mae Henderson claims:

... they [black women] enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. If black women speak a discourse of racial and gendered difference in the dominant or hegemonic discursive order, they speak a discourse of racial and gendered identity and difference in the subdominant discursive order. This dialogic of difference and dialectic of identity characterize both black women's subjectivity and black women's discourse.[83]

Afro-American feminists see the successful completion of these tasks as a way of achieving satisfactory social integrity. However, this is a continuous process which poses enormous obstacles especially to women: the individual psychology and the ego, the ethnic consciousness and the social identity are very often at a dramatic stake in everyday encounters.

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[82] M. G. Henderson, 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition' in *Changing Our Own Words*, Cheryl Wall (ed.) London: Routledge, p. 17

[83] M. G. Henderson, *ibid.*, p. 20 - 21

However, recent critical reappraisal, and fiction for that matter, also try to examine from a different perspective the equally problematic experiences of black men.[84]

Toni Morrison develops the thematic traditions of Afro-American women's literature in the direction already taken and explored by a diverse group of Afro-American writers. She is profoundly interested in the history of black people in America and, particularly, the way in which black women create their own histories. This permanent interest in the past is one that crucially relates to the present as well, so that by 'reading' and interpreting the past, the present is reformulated so as to procure much needed, legitimate space for the black woman in society in general, and in her own ethnic community. At the same time, when problematizing the racial self, Morrison challenges the predominant modes of writing by the utilisation of literary techniques which offer an opportunity to liberate her prose from clichés and ideological constraints inherent in the predominant race-gender discourses which have been pervasively discussed by critics like Susan Willis, Barbara Christian, Debora McDowell, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Homi Bhabha, etc. Though we can hardly label her novels 'experimental' in the sense of the most avant-garde postmodern novels, there is always a taste for innovative forms of narration combined with strikingly unusual character analyses, and *Jazz* is not an exception in this respect. It can be defined as a profoundly dialogic novel that provides a many-sided view of life by using the techniques of *collage*, multiplication of narrative stances, narrative fragmentation, and competing characters' voices. It has been often pointed out in literary criticism that these devices significantly and more comprehensively add to the attempt at constructing the

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84 I refer here to recent works by Toni Morrison /as I shall argue in the paper/, Terri McMillan, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, to name some of the most prolific contemporary fiction writers.

image of the split individual which inhabits the postmodern world. Linda Hutcheon claims the basic characteristics of the postmodern mode of writing to be:

The multiple, the heterogeneous, the different: this is the pluralizing rhetoric of Postmodernism that rejects both the abstract category of single otherness created by "coercive separation and unequal privileges" as well as by the more concrete relegation of the other to the role of "object for enthusiastic information-retrieval."[85]

Morrison's goal is similar to this agenda: from a broad perspective that probes the heterogeneous experienc*ing* of immediate time and place, she depicts a black American woman in the process of defining a complex and variable self at different historical 'moments', which, otherwise, has been traditionally excluded from the theoretical framework of the 'postmodern' . In the case of the Afro-American women, this process involves the parallel creation of new identities and the destruction of obsolete stereotypes which impose a foreclosure to the individual self. The dominant elements in this double process of individuation are, inevitably, gender and race as contextualized in the multi-ethnic context of America.

But there is also much more at stake in this process than it at first appears, as Morrison shows. The whole mosaic of experiences and the ultimate human need for self-definition in a culturally diverse society, as well as in one's own ethnic community, come into focus in *Jazz*. What the novel makes clear is that self-definition is impossibly to be conceived as a smooth, unproblematic process, but rather it is what Karla F. C. Holloway calls a

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[85] L. Hutcheon. A Poetics of Postmodernism. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 66

phenomenon of "fracture and shift."[86] Thus, *Jazz* tries to claim back certain territories of black women's misrepresentations, since:

In American culture, and in the imaginative representations of that culture in literature, our compromised environments often allow publicly constructed racial and sexual identities to supersede private consciousness. The result may be a negative dialectic -- an "enabled" activity /or language/ that dangerously rehearses the dynamics of racism and sexism.[87]

I would suggest that Morrison explores these racial and sexist oppositions in her novel, and does not, cannot find redeeming reconciliation, although she is 'reading' the period of the Jazz Age[88]. On the contrary: she procures the fictional space necessary for the clash between the private consciousness of her characters and the regressive public constructs -- a clash in which a woman of polymorphous subjectivity is born.

The Beat of the Pain

At the outset of *Jazz* we are introduced to a very specific Afro-American community, the New York community in 1926, in the process of accommodating big social changes and, at the same time, entering into 'the Golden' or 'Jazz Age' in America. This has been seen as a period of the ultimate liberation of the soul for introducing a mode of life which emulates artistic performances, and which already questions the values of

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[86] K. F. C. Holloway, 'The Body Politic' in *Subjects and Citizens*, M. Moon and C. Davidson (eds.) Duke University Press, 1995, p. 492

[87] K. F. C. Holloway, *ibid.*, p. 493

[88] The obvious thing to say here will be to mention Morrison's glaring repudiation of the racial and sexist misuse of Sethe in *Beloved*. *Jazz*, in my view, poses the same problems, although from the new historical perspective of the Twenties.

consumerism in the affluent post-World War I America. Blues music, and especially its later development, jazz music, metaphorically stands for 'modernity', with its inherent free improvisation and unrestrained sensual implications in what Alan Rice calls "the libidinous nature of jazzing"[89]:

> Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man.
> Everybody knows your name.
> Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man. [90]

On the other hand, born by Afro-American creativity, blues and jazz music relate the grand story of past frustrations, present longings, and future expectations of black America:

> They are greedy, reckless words, loose and infuriating, but hard to dismiss because underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm, are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus... (*J*, 77)

Yet the glamour attributed to the Jazz Age is easily deconstructed when put under close historical scrutiny. There is another side to the Golden America of the 1920s and 1930s -- that of a segregated, impoverished black community which is at odds both with patriarchal white society and with itself. In his illuminating study of the blues tradition in America, Paul Oliver makes clear that:

> In this manner the blues acted as an emotional safety-valve, canalizing feelings of anger and resentment. The music was enriched whilst

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89 A. J. Rice, 'Finger-Snapping to Train-Dancing and Back Again: The Development of a Jazz Style in African American Prose' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 24, 1994

90 T. Morrison, *Jazz*. New York: Signet, 1992, p. 143. All the quotations will be from this edition, and the page numbers will be given in parenthesis after the text.

the disappointment and frustration that had been experienced were diverted from more violent forms of expression. There were militant blues though...[91]

In this turbulent social context, Afro-American women seem the ones most isolated and hindered by numerous racial prejudices, and very few can adapt to society which holds dear the old images of the black mummy, the sexually insatiable black ogress or the coy mulatto beauty. The traditional Afro-American family, like the white patriarchal culture, also deprives them of the freedom to speak and act for themselves because, if this happens, it will mean outspeaking/loud mouthing their superior male counterparts, husbands and fathers and brothers, who are already, anyway, in a complex position in the white patriarchal society. The question, then, is are they, black women, always the victimised ones, are they *always going to be* the victimised ones? The varied answers to this question, posed by Afro-American feminist theoreticians, are usually problematised on different levels and from different perspectives in the literature by black American women authors. It seems to me that although the question of the black women's socio-historical victimisation is bluntly put in their works, there is always a degree of variation in their answers, for every one of these Afro-American authors pursues her own path, leading towards new interpretations and rewriting of the history of black women in America. These two critical enterprises are inevitably pluralistic and encompassing, and never exhaustive ones. Here I need to quote Ann Hulbert, who discusses the book *Playing in the Dark* (1992) by Morrison which appeared almost simultaneously with *Jazz*. Rather judgmentally, the critic claims:

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91 P. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 273

Her [Morrison's] critical project is most notable, in fact, for being highly derivative. What heresy it contains lies in its lack of originality: Morrison's real accomplishment is to recall, without acknowledging it, the work of the true pioneers who first approached questions about race and imagination... As long as she's speaking in generalities -- which she does frequently and repetitiously -- Morrison manages to maintain her air of literary curiosity.[92]

In my view, Hulbert obviously takes a biased and gender-blind stance, and ignores the 'insignificant' detail that Morrison is a black American *female* critic and novelist, a fact, which already discards frivolous references to the names of other famous literary and -- let's name it, already 'canonical' -- figures like William Stanley Braithwaite and Ralph Ellison, just as great in their own right, of course.

Toni Morrison creates fictional characters which are dramatize the subjective complexity of the 'real-life' American people she knows best -- Afro-Americans and, especially, Afro-American women. Morrison depicts them in the process of transformation from almost inanimate objects into subjects of their own. In *Jazz,* the author introduces the reader to Violet, an extremely unconventional black woman, called by men and women in her community 'Violent', who fits perfectly well into the group of strong, wilful black women characters who inhabit the fictional world of Morrison's novels.

The novel begins with an abrupt dive into the private life of an ordinary family, the Traces, who live through the greatest crisis in their marital life. The appearance of the 'third' person, a very young girl, Dorcas, and the formation of a unconventional *menage a trois*, her subsequent murder by Joe, and, finally, a splitting-and-reunion of the family are the events that

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92 A. Hulbert, 'Romance and Race', *New Republic,* May 18, 1992, Vol. 206, Issue 20, p. 44-45

structure the story. However, more important than the story events themselves are the social processes of disassociation and psychic fragmentation which affect the family. In their mid-fifties, with no children and no relatives in town, Violet and Joe are really dislocated in what is supposed to be *their* community. The vulnerability of their marriage reflects the vulnerability of their selves as they face the prevalent, though well-masked, enmity of a society poisoned by racial prejudice.

As a novelist, Toni Morrison does not restrict herself to employing one level of narration, or to utilising a single point of view, because the reality she depicts requires a broad panorama of life in all of its unexpected variations, rather than momentous picture. This is how her characters, and especially her female characters, come into being: with their own powerful voices and bodies, contesting space to survive in their fictional worlds, and, more to the point, to challenge with their unique voices the addressee's comprehensive ability.[93]

The narration in *Jazz* is remarkably complicated and sometimes 'dubious' one; at certain points it completely questions the reader's ability to identify the speaker, who sometimes 'presides over' the narration from an omniscient perspective, sometimes slips into the 'I-s' of numerous characters: Violet, Joe, Dorcas, Felice, Alice, Golden Gray. At this point, I would argue again with Ann Hulbert's view of *Jazz* that,

... the novel, which is narrated by *an obtrusively mysterious voice*, poses another question: Who is talking? What authority lies behind this intimate portrait of a black community at the height of the black cultural renaissance of the Jazz Age? As if Morrison's aim of tolerantly exploring white writers' depictions of blackness weren't unexpected enough, her novel

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[93] By 'comprehensive ability' I mean the readers' ability to grasp the kaleidoscopic narration and focalisation in *Jazz*.

embarks on what looks like the ultimate mission of self-sabotage: she is questioning a black writer's efforts to penetrate the heart of a black world.[94] [italics mine]

Although there is a misleading impartiality in the tone of the narration, the strong presence of characters, their voices competing for space in the narrative, and the very apt choice of vernacular language, clearly show the author's serious involvement in the fictional problems which are transcript of the actual, 'real-life' concerns of her community. In this sense Morrison does not manipulate her characters, grossly intruding into *their* lives from the position of an omniscient narrator. Quite on the contrary, and in tune with Bakhtin's claim, who states that,

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological cinsciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality).[95]

As it becomes obvious from Morrison's style, there is a very strong feeling and *unobtrusive* empathy on her behalf which account for the intensity of the fictional messages and the freedom of will to operate with which she endows her characters. However, the same dubious attempt at "deciphering" Morrison goes on, and is present in Hulbert's subsequent observation:

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[94] A. Hulbert, *ibid.*, p. 43

[95] M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 348

... she [Morrison] has evidently decided to challenge her readers with a less penetrable story...This novel is not supposed to be a romanticized, well-rounded portrait of black tribulations, and the blues are Morrison's guide to the rawer, less symmetrical chronicle that she aims to offer instead... yet Morrison's riffs on her disoriented characters have a way of ending up flat and faint, even when the opening notes are true. The improvisatory course of a jam session is the evident model for the gnomic narrator...[96]

A quick reference to the efficient *Webster's New World College Dictionary* will show us that the adjective 'gnomic' means 'wise and pithy; full of aphorisms' and this misreading of the narrator's nature should preclude further quoting from Hulbert's essay. However, in my view, the fact that Hulbert 'reads' only *one* narrator in *Jazz* is the more 'alarming' problem, and this understanding of the novel's narrative structure proves that it requires a more detailed explication.

The extradiegetic level of narration is performed by an anonymous 'I' which narrates the events from an almost omniscient perspective, and, since the 'I' does not participate in the story events that are being observed or pondered about, is also a heterodiegetic narrator.[97] Through a series of direct comments it seems possible for us, as readers, to briefly sketch its protean picture. Thus, in such an astute aside, the *I* says:

Risky, I'd say, trying to figure out anybody's state of mind. But worth the trouble if you're like me -- curious, inventive and well-informed. (J, 163)

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[96] A. Hulbert, *ibid.*, p. 47

[97] For an extremely elaborate discussion of different types of narrators from the point of view of contemporary narratology, see, for example, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's book *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge, 1983.

Yet this 'I' easily gives way also to other intradiegetic, participatory 'I-s' -- Violet, Joe, Dorcas' friend. Thus the narratorial line is hardly 'manipulable,' even in the positive sense of the word, by author and by reader equally; much more to this point, as Barthes concludes:

The *I* of discourse can no longer be a place where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored... In other words, the *I* of the one who writes *I* is not the same as the *I* which is read by *thou*. [98]

There are also two intricately interwoven hypodiegetic narrations in *Jazz* told by Violet's grandmother, True Belle, and by Golden Gray, which further entangle the narratorial lines. This layering of narrative instances complicates the perspective in the direction of multi-dimensional and extremely complicated perception of the spatio-temporal framework of the fictional world in *Jazz*. The representation of the diversity of experiences in this way leads to certain hermeneutic gaps in the narration which, in fact, work also towards a deconstruction of the unified narrator -- already as vulnerable as the fictional characters and the readers themselves -- to the level of a "split speaking person"[99] in the Postmodern age or, in the words of Ulla Musarra:

... the narrating subject... has been split up into a number of quasi-equivalent narrative instances.[100]

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[98] R. Barthes, 'To write: An Intransitive Verb?' in *Modern Literary Theory*, P. Rice and P. Waugh (eds.) London: Edward Arnold, 1989, p. 48

[99] J. Kristeva, 'The Ethics of Linguistics', *Critique* 322, March 1974, Vol. XXX, p. 197

[100] U. Musarra, 'Narrative Discourse in Postmodernist Texts...' in *Exploring Postmodernism*, M. Calinescu and D. Fokkema (eds.) Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publ., 1990, p. 229

Thus the multiplication of the narration on the extradiegetic level produces the effect of opening up of the novelistic frames, while in the case of the multiple hypodiegetic narrative instances, the novel seems to delve deeper into its own fictional kernel, i.e. what I will call its 'own' world. This double effect at work in *Jazz* is ultimately leading in the direction of easy alternation of voices and the conflux of perspectives, because as Musarra points out:

> In the Postmodern novel the borderlines between the various narrative levels, between frame and narrated story and between the story and "the story in the story," are often obliterated.[101]

I would like to suggest here that the borderlines between Morrison's prose style and the style of jazz music are also successfully obliterated in *Jazz*. If we launch into a parallel analysis of a jazz piece, and look into its layering of 'narrative instances', though very specific in their expressive mode, of course - the medium of music -- we would find the same attempt at creative improvisation on various levels of musical 'story-telling'. An Afro-American vernacular creation which came into being at the turn of the century, jazz music is characteristically multivocal and polyrhythmic, building up on telling varied nuances of a story. The origins of jazz aesthetisation and appropriation in literature can be traced back to the works of a number of prominent writers, namely Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and nowadays, undoubtedly, Toni Morrison.[102] What Morrison does in her novel is a narration that elaborates upon the three constituent elements of jazz: riffing, signifying, and antiphony. Of these three, the riffing comes

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101 U. Musarra, *ibid.*, p.216

102 For a comprehensive analysis of the relation between literature and jazz, see, for example, the seminal work of Houston Baker Jr *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987

closest to the multiplication of narrative instances as understood in the narratological theory, because, according to the definition of Henry Louis Gates Jr:

The riff is the central component of jazz improvisation. It is a figure musically speaking, a foundation, something you could walk on. A short phrase repeated over the length of a chorus...[103]

In this sense I suggest that the virtuoso 'riffing' in Morrison's novel *Jazz* is a variable, fluctuating play upon the invariable *motif of the search of the mother*: Violet's coming to terms with the memory of an absentee father and the suicide of her mother, Rose Dear, who:

... knowing her daughters were in good hands, better hands than her own, at last, ... dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun. (*J*, 126)

Joe's own hectic search for the "wild woman" from the woods of his adolescence, "this indecent speechless lurking insanity," and the lack of the 'unknown' father is equally important, though unobtrusively emphasised in the hypodiegetic narration (*J*, 212); or Dorcas' reminiscences about her parents burned to death into a house fire, and the remembrance of a mother's "slap across her face":

... the pop and sting of it and how it burned...And of all slaps she got, that one was the one she remembered best because it was the last. (*J*, 52)

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103 H. L. Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 105, quoted in Alan J. Rice, 'Finger-Snapping to Train-Dancing and Back Again: The Development of Jazz Style in African American Prose' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 24, 1994

Similarly, there is Golden Gray's symbolic search for the mother through a literal search for the father, "the blackest man in the world..." who is no longer a symbolic authority, but rather a literal counterpart -- in skin colour and upbringing -- to his own son (*J*, 187) I am tempted to suggest, then, that Morrison was very much aware of the importance of an emphatic riffing of the motif, since it resides, in different variations, in the narrative lines of the rest of the characters, Malvonne, Alice Manfred, Felice. Through an elaborate use of riffing, Morrison achieves that persisting positional destabilisation which is characteristic of the narration in *Jazz*, or, in Hutcheon's words, "The narrative continuity is threatened, is both used and abused, inscribed and subverted."[104]

The second characteristic feature of Morrison's 'jazzy' prose style in this texts is the use of antiphony, "a pattern of call and response,"[105] which, in my view, links her both to the traditions of the Harlem Renaissance and to the values of the Afro-American literature by contemporary women writers. Antiphony, originally in the spirituals, and later in the blues and jazz tradition, is based on call and response echoing each other, and thus I would suggest antiphony's interpretation as an idiosyncratic form of musical dialogism. Viewed from a structuralist perspective, antiphony can be related to the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism as well. For instance, Henderson makes clear that:

According to Bakhtin, each social group speaks in its own "social dialect" -- possesses its own unique language -- expressing shared values,

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[104] L. Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 59

[105] A very good analysis of antiphony, signifying, and riffing in literary works by Afro-American authors is introduced in Alan J. Rice's essay, *op.cit.*, p. 106

perspectives, ideology, and norms. These social dialects become the "languages" of heteroglossia ...[106]

What antiphony does in music, then, is what dialogism does in literature: it is calling (to) somebody, and demanding and getting answers back; but such a process can be exceptionally introvert as well; this means, a calling-and-answering to the numerous 'selves' inside. As Henderson explains:

The interlocutory character of black women's writings is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or "generalized Other," but a dialogue with the aspects of "otherness" within the self.[107]

'Signifying', on the other hand, is a practice inextricable from the cultural practices of the Afro-American people, or, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims in his study *Figures in Black,* "... learning how to signify is often part of our adolescent education."[108]

Signifying is a language of discreet implications and expedient indirect argumentation, which relies on the masterful play of the individual with words and concepts, to creat a vast range, or rather 'ripples' of meanings; thus we can agree upon the truth that,

In this sense, one does not signify something; rather, *one signifies in some way.*[109] [italics mine]

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106 M.G. Henderson, *op.cit.*, p. 18
107 M. G. Henderson, *ibid.*, p. 18
108 H. L. Gates Jr., *Figures in Black.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 236
109 H. L. Gates Jr., *ibid.*, p. 239

Gates also mentions in his book, in a somewhat oxymoronic paragraph in my view, that, according to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Zora Neale Hurston, "signifying *is* a *sexless* rhetorical game" [italics mine], while these two scholars are the first to discuss exhaustively female signifying rituals.[110] I would rather disagree at this point with the opinion that signifying is "a sexless rhetorical game", because Morrison's novel *Jazz does* incorporate successfully signifying in the narration, and the signifying process is palpably gendered. What I mean here is that her female characters, through their polyphonic voices, are playing that very discreet game of argumentation and solicitation of space and subjectivity in dialogues with the rest of the characters, in dialogues with their own selves, as well as in dialogues with the reader. In this way signifying relates to what Henderson calls "speaking in tongues," which, as a trope, has two connotations for her: the first one is "the ability to speak in diverse known languages," which is exactly the Bakhtinian social heteroglossia, and the second aspect is the "glossolalia," or the concrete individual's private inner-speech.

If glossolalia suggests private, nonmediated, nondifferentiated univocality, heteroglossia connotes public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse... It is the first as well as the second meaning which we privilege in speaking of black women writers: the first connoting polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices, and the second signifying intimate, private, inspired utterances. Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other/s/, black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses -- discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns.[111]

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[110] H. L. Gates Jr., *ibid.*, p.241

[111] M. G. Henderson, *op. cit.*, p.22 - 23

In conclusion, the narrative techniques employed by Morrison are routes to exploring *the flexibility of the word,* for in *Jazz* it certainly does 'signify', yet it also dissolves, unexpectedly, into numerous other referential possibilities; these techniques explore also the malleability of the media, for, as I have argued, the text is not only linguistic, it is musical as well; finally, the narrative techniques seek ways to address the fragile status of the reader, this new, postmodern interlocutor, and to delve deep into the sources and the degrees of interpretative resistance which emerge in every stage of the reader's comprehension of both characters and story events.

Violet's Voice

In his famous essay "The Art of Fiction" Henry James exclaims somewhat self-consciously,

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?[112]

Playing a little on James' succinct definition of 'a character', we can say that Violet's character is rather determined by 'accidents'. That is why what we learn about Violet on different narrative levels is, in itself, a constantly changing mosaic, rather than a crystallised essence or a momentous picture. This is certainly true of the other characters in *Jazz* as well, because Morrison has an acute, scrutinising artistic eye for the problematic and the strange in all its varied metamorphoses *among* people and *within* people. However, in my view, Violet is the most challenging embodiment of the postmodern split subject in the novel, and it will be my

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[112] H. James, *Collected Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 174

intention to try to delineate the different aspects that constitute her individuality.

What do we learn about Violet from the extradiegetic narrator? The 'I' states straightforwardly that:

She is awfully skinny, Violet; fifty, but still good looking when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out of the church would be the end of it – the shame and all -- but it wasn't. Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house. (*J*, 12)

The rest of the descriptive details, not only about Violet, but also about the other characters and the story events themselves, we have to compile from the many levels of the complicated narration: suddenly the anonymous 'I' turns into Violet's own 'I', and the reader is actually led into a process of "deduction" of information, and the deduction is as much dependent on Violet's choice of view-point, as it is on Joe's story, on Alice's recollections, on the omniscient I's perspective, etc. The 'chaining' of numerous stories has at least double function: on the one hand, it catalyzes the events, while, on the other, it enigmatically encodes the characters, hence, frustrating the readers' comprehension.

The specific 'encoding' of Violet can be interpreted again on two levels: one is the level of her relations and interaction with people from her community, and the second one is the level of communication with the 'selves within'.

Joe never learned of Violet's public craziness. Stuck, Gistan and the other male friends passed of the incidents to each other, but couldn't bring

themselves to say much moreto him than "How is Violet? Doing okay, is she?" Her private cracks, however, were known to him.

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. (*J*, 34)

However, coming to terms with people, those closest to her, is a process less painful than coming to terms with her own polyvalent self:

... with the other woman occupying herself at a table pretending to drink from a cup. Her mother. She didn't want to be like that. Oh never like that (*J*, 121)

Violet seems to be searching for space in which to define her subjectivity, and that is why she chooses to explore her immediate reality rather than to accommodate to it. Morrison deftly follows the rites of exploration that shape Violet's subjectivity by depicting different aspects of her relations with other people, as well as her own changing proprioceptive[113] attitude towards body and soul. The latter, especially, is what significantly changes Violet's perception of reality and repositions her as a polymorphous self in her community, because, as Kaja Silverman eloquently argues in her latest book *The Threshold of the Visible World*:

...our experience of "self" is always circumscribed by and derived from the body.[114]

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[113] The concept of proprioceptivity is exhaustively discussed in Kaja Silverman's latest book *The Threshold of the Visible World*.

[114] K. Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 9

As readers, we construct our overall understanding of Violet's character through the analysis of the double interaction -- of coming to terms with people and also with one's self -- at work in *Jazz*. On the one hand, she is depicted as continuously undergoing changes, not just the psycho-somatic changes of her menopause, although Joe makes such a point when he talks Malvonne into giving him the key to her flat in order to meet Dorcas, and says the following,

> "Well. Violet. You know how *funny* she been since her Change."
> "Violet funny way before that..." [italics mine] (J, 61)

Thus she is being constructed as a subject in the ways in which she acts and *re*acts in the various stages of the controversial relation to her husband, in the almost paranormal relation to dead Dorcas, in the dubious relation to *other* women (Alice Manfred, Malvonne, clients). On the other hand, Violet's voice as an intradiegetic narrator is just as powerful and arresting as the voice of the extradiegetic narrator, and when she says,

> Maybe everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own (*J*, 37)

We are eager to believe this claim which basically challenges the predominantly mediocre, silenced existence of black women in society, and prompts 'crying it out, all of it'. Therefore, it's no longer possible for her to live with the birds, and, especially, with the parrot who said 'Love you' -- although symbolically they are 'speaking in their different tongues' as well -- because encaged and habitually treated as /be/loved objects, the birds remind 'this' Violet of her own encaged self, misused by habit and a feeling of otherness both in the family and in her community.

That Violet should not have let the parrot go. He forgot how to fly and just trembled on the sill, but when she ran home from the funeral, having been literally thrown out by the hard-handed boys and the frowning men, "I love you" was exactly what neither she nor that Violet could bear to hear...

"Get away," she told him. "Go on off somewhere!" (*J*, 114, 115)

Thus the 'renegade' tongue of Violet, with its converging heteroglossic and glossolalic qualities, unexpectedly surpasses the conformity that stifles the expression of a black woman's voice in the ethnic community; first through 'speaking out the different' in her, consequently Violet chooses to 'enact' her new (true?) self as well.

A crucial structural and hermeneutic point in *Jazz* is the analysis of Violet's marriage for it entangles a number of people in on-going controversial relations. Joe and Violet's marriage, then, seems to be one based on love, mutual understanding and twenty long years of habit. Falling in love with Joe comes like a miracle of a summer night, after a hard day of labour as a share-cropper, when all of a sudden:

... a man fell out of the tree above her head and landed at her side... their first conversation began in the dark /when neither could see much more of the other than silhouette/ and ended in a green-and-white dawn, nighttime was never the same for her. (*J*, 128, 129)

However, there is nothing in the harsh reality of the 'reconstructed' South to keep Violet and Joe settled there, for that is the period of shift and constant search of the promised better life for black people. Yet Morrison depicts the coming to the big City as just unsettling an experience as is the

shift itself: a whole historic era unfolds for them in the conscious choice of moving to the City and the unconscious acceptance of its bitter rules. To find a niche in the social strata and to settle down 'to happiness' is what seems to be the purpose of the Traces. In this attempt Violet is turning into a part of the new "commodity market"[115] of the 1920s which requires from people total submission to its rigorous laws and, what is more dangerous, social depersonalisation. In this way, within the bigger social framework, Violet is already undergoing the change of accepting the conformity of the racial self in urban America.

On a more intimate, personal scale, Violet's relationship with Joe is daunted by a significant absence: there is no child to fulfil her dreams and to compensate for her own childhood memories of a suicidal mother and delinquent, absentee father:

The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama? (J, 126)

The above resolution, quite unsurprising in my opinion, is the resolution of a twelve-year-old girl, who later in her life, through maturation and love for Joe, 'the significant other', suffers three miscarriages and learns the pain of expectancy very personally. This position of unfulfilled motherhood, then, is what puts Violet in doubly dangerous situation of social depersonalization in a traditional Afro-American community. Marianne Hirsch makes the following comment:

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115 K. Holloway, *op.cit.*, p.491

The multiplicity of "women" is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter. Her representation is controlled by her object status, but her discourse, when it is voiced, moves her from object to subject. But, as long as she speaks as mother, she must always remain the object of her child's process of subject-formation; she is never fully a subject. Second, the figure of mother is determined by her body more intensely than the figure of woman.[116]

In my view, Violet as a subject is bound to multiple 'objectification': on the one hand, in the very private spheres of her subjectivity, Violet becomes the object *per se* through mirroring her self in the memories of a suicidal mother, and through *the lack* of mirroring in a child; while on the other hand, she is objectified on a major social scale as *the* complete 'nobody' in society.

That is why one of the most impressive episodes in *Jazz* is the story of Violet's contemplated, or maybe dreamed-of, crime -- the kidnapping of the baby in the street, and the series of 'private cracks' which follow -- because it conflates the private and the social dimensions of objectification. We see in the scene namely the objectification of Violet in the discourse of the passers-by and the onlookers as they divide in two over their judgement of her,

The little knot of people, more and more furious at the stupid, irresponsible sister, at the cops, at the record lying where a baby should be, had just about forgotten about the kidnapper when a man at the curb said, "That her?" He pointed to Violet at the corner and it was when everybody turned toward where his finger led that Violet, tuckled by the pleasure of discovery she was soon to have, threw back her head and laughed out loud. (*J*, 33)

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[116] M. Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, p.12

Morrison uses again a narrative gap to encode the possible meanings of Violet's behaviour and also perhaps to caution the reader against a premature/preconceived interpretation of the forthcoming crisis:

Violet sat down on the wide steps nestling her bag of irons and oil and shampoo in the space behind her calves.

When the baby was in her arms, she inched its blanket up around the cheeks against the threat of wind too cool for its honey-sweet, butter-colored face. Its big- eyed noncommittal stare made her smile. Comfort settled itself in her stomach and a kind of skipping, running light travelled her veins. (*J*, 31)

What is the truth about the incident and where is the rationality in Violet's behaviour? Is there a rationality *at all*? Is there *one*, single rationality? We can find only partially satisfying answers to these questions, and still we feel that there is something 'wrong' with the available explanations, because we are already to doubt the obvious in Violet's behaviour in the same way in which we are ready to believe what remains hidden in her. That is how we, as readers, perceive her as a human being: not merely as a bound fictional character, for there are always some hidden psychological aspects in Violet that oppose clear-cut definitions and preconceived interpretations on behalf of the reader as for right and wrong, normal and abnormal her behaviour. Thus her "public craziness," or rather her "private cracks," have more to reveal about *the other* Violet *within,* the madwoman who fights the dead body of Dorcas and her spectrally fleeting, yet palpably present, dead mother and unborn children. Thus Violet is really positioned as one of the many:

Madwomen: the ones who are compelled to redo acts of birth every day. I think, "Nothing is given for me." I wasn't born for once and for all...The affirmation of an internal force that is capable of looking at life without dying of fear, and above all of looking at itself, as if you were simultaneously the other -- indispensable to love -- and nothing more nor less than me.[117]

Violet's imagination is a very vivid one: an imagination bordering almost on the thresholds of hallucination, which pushes her to the crime and yet stops her from actually committing it. Combined together, imagination and a passionate need for fulfilling love, totally transform her personality in the direction of growing awareness of her own mind and body, and constantly attempting to reposition herself in the present. The notion that, in fact, past experiences are never absolutely 'gone', and the idea that the self is somehow 'ricocheting' between past and present, do not necessarily need to be assimilated completely on the level of human consciousness in order to produce changes in one's life. However, Violet's life as woman could not possibly be the same, or remain unchanged, by the continuous questioning of the values of the past and the quest for repositioning in the present.

Violet's shifts through life are also shifts through her relations with *other* women, namely Dorcas, Alice Manfred, Malvonne, her clients. Seen by an extradiegetic narrator as "strange" and "shadowy," "living with a flock of birds," (*J*, 11), Violet is exploring again the potency of relations, rather than accommodating to people, least of all letting herself be assimilated by these people. It seems that in the relations with women especially she finds the relevant clues for performing the really difficult task of living in one's own community in which, simultaneously, she loses and constructs her identity :

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117 H. Cixous, 'Coming to Writing' in *"Coming to Writing" and Other Essays*, D. Jenson (ed.) Harvard University Press, 1991, p.6

that is why Violet says, "Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing." (*J*, 24)

There is yet another, somewhat abnormal, obsession which serves as a milestone in her self-definition: the obsession with Dorcas, the rival who turns Violet's life upside-down and, even dead, is a shaping presence. Dorcas' picture in a silver frame seems to function as projection of her own longed-for daughter who is already dead before ever being born:

Not smiling, but alive at least and very bold... An inward face -- whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, because I am looking at you. (*J*, 14, 22)

By trying to slash the face of dead Dorcas, Violet is again 'irrational' in the eyes of the community members, and, consequently, she is expelled from the burial ceremony. The same motif of madness is emphacised in her desperate attempts to reconstruct the story of Dorcas' life to the minutest detail, although some women tell her:

"You in trouble"..."Deep, deep trouble. Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time."

Violet agrees that it must be so; not only is she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too. (*J*, 25)

A question arises once more as to the degree of irrationality in the act of self-assertive violence[118] and also in this unconventional 'falling in love', and I would suggest that they stand symbolically for Violet's need to

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118 For an in-depth analysis of self-assertive violence, see especially Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness.* London: Penguin Books,1984, p. 262

challenge even death through the unorthodox appropriation of power over the dead. The memories and the reconstruction of Dorcas' life, just like the memories of her own difficult childhood, are echoes of the past which significantly shape Violet for what she is in the present.

At this point we can also try to get into the depths of Violet's complicated relationship with Alice, Dorcas' aunt. Instead of suing or fighting Violet who is the source of *her* misery, Alice is compassionate in her own way, feeling for and understanding the *other* woman from the position of age and life experience, though never being absolutely reconciliatory in her attitude. There is no obvious sisterhood in their relationship, but rather more compassionate, human understanding between two women, which is mutually helpful and constructive. The new, significant dimensions in Violet's relationship with the *other* women point once again at her re-positioning in the context of the present and the reconstitution of what has been her 'self' in the past. At this point we can also try to get into the depths of Violet's complicated relationship with Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt. Alice is a woman who has her own burden of memories from the past that shape her subjectivity just as much:

At fifty-eight with no children of her own, and one she had access to and responsibility for dead, she wondered about the hysteria, the violence, the damnation of pregnancy without marriageability. It had occupied her own parents' mind completely for as long as she could remember them... The moment when she got breasts they were bound and resented, a resentment that increased the outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities... (J, 97)

Instead of suing or fighting Violet who is the source of *her* misery, Alice is compassionate in her own, unspeakable way, feeling for and understanding the *other* woman from the position of age and life experience,

though she is never absolutely reconciliatory in her attitude either. Thus, the first step for Alice is to let Violet in her own small private world:

The woman who avoided the streets let into her living room the woman who sat down in the middle of one... a brutal woman black as soot... (*J*, 93, 95)

There is no obvious sisterhood in their relationship, for there are betrayal and death that will never be forgotten by either of them. Nevertheless, we perceive a human, mutually constructive understanding between two women who have overcome the crisis itself, Dorcas' death, just to find out that further crises are still to come after *that*, or maybe there has never been a true end to them at all, and all of these are crises that basically threaten their 'integrity' as individuals.

The new dimensions in Violet's relationship with the *other* women point once again at her re-positioning in the context of the present and the reconstitution of what has been her 'self' in the past. The re-positioning is not a finalised act, but rather a developmental process which unsettles the symbolic order in two ways: first, through questioning the canonicity of the dominant power discourse; second, through questioning the degree of self-incurred victimisation, or, in other words, the personal discourse of self-victimisation.

Violet questions the dominant power discourse by the refusal to accept the rigid borders of what is considered 'social normalcy', for *normalcy* proves to easily transform itself into *normalisation*; it is in fact enforced uniformity in behaviour according to a double standard -- of white people (men and women), and of black men -- which debases individuality at the expense of offering a fake protection in the much longed-for 'nuclear family'. This longing for the traditional, 'nuclear' family is an ideological dilemma for

the Afro-Americans rather than a purely emotional need, and this, can be related to the legacy of slavery. Such a dilemma, in my view, influences women dramatically, by playing on the ever-so-sensitive note of maternity and husband-wife relationship.[119]

On the other hand, Violet joins the impressive league of strong women who inhabit Morrison's fictional world. What makes them strong, and her as well, is that they are actively engaged in what I call 'personal discourse of self-victimisation'. In the case of Violet, this is an important process which leads her to the endless (internal) debates with her own self. Thus, the problem which she is solving has more to do with the *present* and her own empowering agency in the process of socialisation in a new community,[120] rather than with the inherently unsurpassable legacy of the slavery, which has precluded black agency in the past, and especially black women's agency. As a split subject, Violet painfully clashes with the reality of the 'big City' in the 1920, but the 'insecurity' of her polymorphous identity is a secure way to defy social stasis, and to search for more personalised relation with people in her small world.

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119 I was reminded of this recently in my re-reading of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* and *Disappearing Acts*.

120 By 'new' I mean here the Afro-American community of the 1920ies and the 1930ies.

CHAPTER 3

TIME-SPACE AND POWER: HEIDEGGER, FOUCAULT, AND BAKHTIN

Being – a matter, but not a being.
Time – a matter, but nothing temporal.
M. Heidegger, 'Time and Being'

The analysis of the concepts of space and time traditionally fall into the domain of philosophy, yet Bakhtin's innovative study of the chronotope in the novel[121] brings them in the focus of literary criticism as well. I would like to refer back to philosophy and the ontology of these two concepts, by bridging Heidegger's theory of time and space with Foucault's analysis of the power concept, which, in my opinion, provides a socio-historical framework to these two purely philosophical concepts. In conjunction with Bakhtin's understanding of the chronotope, these theories can be valuable source for a new look at Toni Morrison's books *Beloved* and *Jazz,* since by applying them to the textual analysis of the novels, we would be able to shift the emphasis from the workings of the social, external factors to the internal mechanisms of individual memory and 're-memoring' the past. Both Sethe and Violet are engaged in such a crucial repositioning and redifining of the meaning of time and space as agents in the formation and sustaning of personal memory. The ability to survive and live through changing time and space at present is also a healing way of dealing with the bitter legacies of the past.

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121 M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin.* Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992

Time-space, the Chronotope, and *Dasein*

Heidegger's theory of time and space has often been criticised for its indifference to the particular historical setting – an indifference if not outspoken, then at least latent in his outstanding book *Being and Time* (1927) and the numerous papers on the phenomenology of existence. However, his work *The Concept of Time,* building significantly upon Einstein's theory of relativity, clearly emphasises 'particularity' as an inherent characteristic of these two concepts. In *The Concept of Time*, Heidegger would eloquently argue that,

... Space is nothing in itself; there is no absolute space. It exists merely by way of the bodies and energies contained in it... Time too is nothing. It persists merely as a consequence of the events taking place in it. There is no absolute time, and no absolute simultaneity either... Time is that within which events take place.[122]

This Heideggerian claim is very closely related to Bakhtin's reading and appropriation of Einstein's theory of relativity in the context of literature. Bakhtin points that time and space cannot be disconnectedly analysed; quite on the contrary – they are endlessly fusing, and the *chronotope* is the encompassing term for their fusion. Hence, an isolated, 'separatist' analysis of these two concepts is an abstraction, serving purely theoretical purposes which exclude human agency. If we agree upon the idea of the chronotope as such a spacio-temporal fusion, we can see the way 'the City' in *Jazz* and '124' in *Beloved* function as such powerful chronotopes in the novels.

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122 M. Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*. Translated by William McNeill. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 3E

In the example of *Jazz*, the City almost has a life of its own: the City, with its promise of racial liberation, opportunity, and economic abundance, lures to the North thousands of black Americans. Being able to influence so many people in such a way - by promising a new start and freedom, although luring into the known – makes one perceive the City almost as another human being. In *Beloved*, 124 is more than a run-down house; for its living and ghostly inhabitants, 124 is a place that has put a spell on time by transforming it from a linear into a circular, almost magical reality. Thus, time and space, isolated from each other, cannot function adequately neither in the world of fiction, as Morrison shows us, nor in the 'real' world as described by the philosophers.

To return once again upon some philosophical contemplations in Heidegger, by focusing on the time-space relationship, *Dasein* is conceptualised as primordially being-in-the-world in a open spatio-temporal 'world'. In other words, the existential structure of *Dasein* is characteristically temporal:

[...] time is Dasein... Dasein always is in a manner of its possible temporal being. Dasein is time, time is temporal. Dasein is not time, but temporality... Dasein is its past, it is the possibility in running ahead to this past. In this running ahead I am authentically time, I have time. In so far as time is in each case mine, there are many times. *Time itself* is meaningless; time is temporal.[123]

Another important point in Bakhtin's understanding of the chronotope, which relates to Heidegger's concept of 'potentiality' of time, is the existence of the so-called 'heterochrony' (in Russian 'raznovremennost'): in other words, the

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[123] M. Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 21E

availability of *many* (private) senses of time and space. The appropriation of heterochrony, especially in the genre of the novel, leads to a phenomenon called 'hybridisation', which accounts for the possibility of a polyvalent depiction of life, and also of a polyvalent reading of the work of art. For Bakhtin, hybridisation incorporates heteroglossia and heterochrony as the true basis for adequate depiction of human life in literature. Morrison offers an excellent example of a novelist working towards such a polyvalent depiction of life in her books: the author develops models of fictional worlds which replicate the 'real' life in its complexity and diversity. Having in mind not only *Beloved* and *Jazz*, but other novels like *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* as well, we may say that one of the most striking characteristics of Morrison's style as a writer is the ease with which she employs heterochrony to produce a specific 'rippling' temporal effect.

A third aspect of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which has an especially strong literary repercussion, is his view that chronotopes, being specific to different social orders, are potentially 'historical' in their nature. In other words:

> ... in society and in individual life, chronotopes also compete with each other. As senses of the world, they may implicitly dispute (or agree with) each other. That is, the relation of chronotopes to each other may be *dialogic*.[124]

Bakhtin's observation that chronotopes are not explicitly present in an everyday human activity, but rather they are the very *basis* for that activity is yet another key characteristic feature of the chronotope. In a similar way, Heidegger points out emphatically that,

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[124] G. S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of Prosaics*, p. 369

Dasein cannot be proven as an entity, it cannot even be pointed out. The primary relation to Dasein is not that of contemplation, but 'being it'.[125]

It becomes obvious, then, that the most important characteristic of *Dasein* is its existence, or the enactment, within the spatio-temporal plain. Maybe with the observations mentioned here in mind, Bakhtin finally concludes in relation to the chronotope:

Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible... An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But the event does not become a figure [*obraz*]. It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers -- the time of human life, of historical time -- that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas.[126]

In its broadest philosophical sense, then, the chronotope can be defined as an ideological tool for the essential interpretation of human experience and actions.[127] It can help us investigate not only the relation of human actions to their social context, but also the levels on which the social context is no longer a 'passive' background, but an active agent itself, although protean one, which gives shape or mutilates events and human

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[125] M. Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 9E

[126] M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope', p. 250

[127] One has to keep in mind, of course, the path-breaking importance of Bakhtin's application of the term 'chronotope' to the specific context of literature. However, my thoughts on power and the chronotope (or the hyphenated concept 'space-time') in this chapter are of a more general character.

experience of these events. In this way, the space-time orientation itself functions as a basic socialising agent, because:

Purposive movement and perception, both visual and haptic, give human beings their familiar world of disparate objects in space. Place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell. Space... is given by the ability to move. Movements are often directed toward, or repulsed by, objects and places. Hence space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and -- more abstractly -- as the area defined by a network of places.[128]

Therefore, by providing a framework for answering the question of what time-space does to people's social *habitat*, the chronotope also questions human *Dasein* in general. Undoubtedly, Morrison is engaged in such a critical examination of the human existence throughout her works; however, as a black woman writer, what she has at stake is a tradition of denigration of Afro-Americans, and especially of Afro-American women, which means a flat denial of existence as such. In the theoretical discourse *Dasein* is,

... that entity in its Being which we know as human life; this entity is the specificity of its Being, the entity that we each ourselves are, which each of us finds in the fundamental assertion: I am.[129]

For Morrison and her female characters, then, *Dasein* has a very special meaning: it is a struggle first to establish a possibility to speak up at all, and

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[128] Y-F. Tuan, *Space and Place*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 17
[129] M. Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, p. 6E

only after that, a plausible assertion 'I am.' For the ease of this simple 'I am,' which most of us would accept without questioning, actually challenges notions of agency and presence: in Morrison, there is no longer a black, hence invisible, body; quite on the contrary, there is a human being which contemplates its own existence.

Dasein, in Heidegger's view, can be defined as yet another 'fusion' -- of *being-in-the-world* and *being-with-one-another*, and, ransplanted onto Bakhtinian 'ground', this fusion will once again point at the inherent heteroglossic quality of human existence. Although performing sometimes in a monosyllabic form, for example when in pain and sorrow, a human being is always in a complex dialogic relation to him-/herself and to the rest of humanity. In Heidegger's words this will mean that:

Being with one another in the world, having this world as being with one another, has a distinctive ontological determination.. The fundamental way of the Dasein of the world, namely, having world there with one another, is *speaking*. Fully considered, speaking is: oneself speaking *out* in speaking *with* another *about* something. It is predominantly in speaking that man's being-in-the-world takes place.[130]

In *Beloved* and *Jazz* the attempt of Sethe and Violet to speak up the unspeakable can be interpreted as such a wish for a meaningful existence in a community of people, not in isolation. Sethe's relation both with Denver and with Paul D develops into a richer, more satisfying human experience after she tries to put in words the tragedy of infanticide; Violet, on the other hand, tries to find a way to communicate equally tragic experiences in her relation with Alice Manfred and Joe.

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130 M. Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 8E

When we accept Heidegger's and Bakhtin's interpretations of the ontological time-space conundrum, we can easily relate to yet another conundrum posited by Foucault: the operation of power in society. If we look at power merely as an effect, an outcome of use or misuse of a range of choices, it seems that power *per se* has very little to do with time-space. However, by shifting the emphasis namely upon power, I would like to illustrate that there is an inherent relation between these two concepts -- power and space-time -- which always affects human *Dasein*. Such bound co-existence of power and space-time, then, can be considered a vital element in the production of a speaking subject, and her changing sense of self, as Morrison's novels show us.

The Origin of Power. Power as an Originator

Most of the scholars who discuss the concept of power in Foucault commence by posing the legitimate question "What is power for him?" This question obviously relates to the nature of power, as if power is something material, formalised, bounded in measures and volume. However, it is Gilles Deleuze who draws attention to the fact that, in the realm of Foucaultian theory, in order to begin investigations and provide explanations of the nature of power, one must ask first of all what is the mode of operation of power, i. e. what are its operative dimensions.[131] If we start questioning the mode of operation of power in society, then we will probe into the essence of numerous social activities, and grasp even more thoroughly the individuals' behaviour. In the long run we will inevitably reach a point of evaluative analysis of actions and actants as performed in particular space-time co-

131 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*. Translated by Sean Hand, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnneapolis Press, 1988

ordinate planes, and such analysis in a literary context relates to the interpretation of chronotopes.[132]

If the concept of power is to be deconstructed for interpretative purposes, I would like to suggest the following propositions, derived from Foucault's theory of power, as starting points for my argument. First, power is not localizable, though it is local; it is fluid, flexible and unstable. For Foucault, this is the microphysics of power. It means that what we traditionally call 'power' is always what comes on the surface of the power mechanisms, rather than the power itself. Power, then, has no essence; it is operational and that is why it is less property than a strategy. Also power is not an attribute to a subject or object, but a relation between forces. Power is not in the 'form', but in the points of collision of forces. Power is not identical with destructive violence; the collision of forces is beyond violence.

Thus posited, the above propositions point to the idea that any further discussions of power should be predominantly focused on the interaction between actants (human agents), not the results, or the outcomes, of events. Naturally, the outcomes matter, but what matters even more is what people make of the experiences and interactions with other people. For Morrison, who is interested in this more pragmatic and anthropocentric notion rather than in the purely philosophical analysis of power, the importance of interaction between people is conspicuously demonstrated both in *Beloved* and in *Jazz*. What makes Sethe 'powerful,' although suffering, heroine is her ability to translate the pain from her induced infanticide into meaningful relationships with her daughter Denver, with Baby Suggs and Paul D, and, most importantly, with her own self. Violet, on the other hand, learns to live with the memories from the past and makes peace with her mind by way of

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[132] My understanding of the chronotope is based solely on Bakhtin's extensive essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope'. Other interpretations of the chronotope, i. e. Ukhtomsky's in the field of biology, are beyond the scope of the present work.

accepting Joe, Dorcas, and Alice Manfred in her secluded life. In this sense, Morrison indirectly points at the above characteristic features of the power concept, of course, by using the techniques of the novel. The state of empowerment in marginalised female characters like Sethe and Violet can account for the power of Morrison's fiction itself: the clear message, which her works convey, is a message of acting against all odds, of defying fears of others and – significantly – of defying fear of one's true self.

If 'doing' and 'interacting' matter so much, then Foucault could be considered the essential philosopher of act-as-process, who reverses the traditional ontological chain 'from matter to motion' to lay a stronger emphasis on the actual importance of social dynamics rather than on the actual embodiment of power. Silverman, for instance, in line with Foucault' s own view, points out that,

Power was not to be found in leaders or social organisations or parties or in any given social structure, but was rather a kind of "discourse," a set of terms or symbolic representations that link, in an abstract way, the given instances of discipline and surveillance at work in social groups.[133]

A basic issue in the discussion of power, then, will be the analysis of polymorphous dynamic systems, which constantly evolve interacting forces. In this case, however, the meaning of the prefix 'micro-' does not refer to a minute existence, but to the new level of existence and interpretation of power relations in society. This interpretation aims at deconstruction of the actual mechanisms of functioning, rather than at general, overall descriptions of resultant events. As Foucalt holds, " 'Micro' therefore means mobile and non-localisable connections."[134] In Morrison, though on a different, fictional-world level, the mobility and lack of localisation of power relations describe a mode of existence for her characters: on the surface, their lives are stagnant and inconsequential, but in reality they are bearers of personal histories and memories which could be multiplied into similar life-stories of other women of color in America. If we have in mind this fact, we would be able to deconstruct not only the 'power' in Sethe's message of infanticide or in

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[133] D. Silverman, "Self-Starter" in *American Scholar*, Winter 1995, Vol. 64, Nr. 1

[134] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Clinic*, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *op.cit.*, p. 74

Violet's violent attack upon a dead body, but also the power to live with the memories of the past.

Obviously, the main problem in understanding the concept of power arises from the difficulty to differentiate between the 'unlocalizable' nature of power and the fact that it is 'local' *per se*. From the first sight, it seems that there is a contradiction in terms: the common sense prompts that if something is 'local', then it is 'localizable' too. However, there is no contradiction in this case for Foucault. By 'local he means 'pertinent' to a system, one which is intransient to the context of the model in question, while 'unlocalisable' literally means one which is 'untraceable' in particular forms, but is manifested as passing through points.

Namely, because power is generated between points of collision between forces, it is flexible and fluid in its transformations. Power can be symbolically compared to a giant, abstract sponge, imbued with meanings and circulating messages. Although *de facto* 'formless', it can grow or dwindle respectively, due to changes in the qualitative status of the relations between the points of collision mentioned above. In other words, as Lefebvre writes:

Power aspires to control space in its entirety, so it maintains it in a 'disjointed unity', as at once fragmentary and homogeneous: it divides and rules...[135]

The 'materiality' of power can be related only to the conspicuous existence of mechanisms of regulation which are embodied in the diagram. For Foucault, the diagram is a presentation of the relations between forces unique to a

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135 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 388

particular formation, or 'strata.'[136] In the context of *Beloved*, for example, the strata in question can be easily named 'slavery,' while in *Jazz*, the strata is the urban America of the 1920s and 1930s. That is how the strata in *Beloved,* and the social relations it entails is generate aggression, a sense of historical loss, and cultural dislocation not only for Sethe, but also for Paul D. This is the 'real-ness' of power which we perceive as having dimensions and particular forms, since it is enacted within the spatial-temporal plain of everyday life, while the collision between the numerous forces stands for the 'materiality' of power.

In what way is this delusive impression of materiality of power achieved? In order to answer this question, I have to discuss here the notions of 'visibility' and 'articulability,' or 'sayability,' in Foucault. These concepts also lead to somewhat contradictory explanations, due to the inevitable dichotomy between what these terms mean for Foucault and what they mean for a non-philosophic mind.

For Foucault, the visible belongs to the non-discursive level of reality. Visibilities are not hidden, yet they are not immediately visible to the inner 'eye'. This means that unless the mind reconstructs for itself the picture of the undergoing active relations between objectified entities, it cannot reconcile the form to the meaning. By interpreting visibility in this way, we can provide an explanation for the recurrent phenomena of self-delusion and/or clashes with reality, where the mind fails to articulate 'realistically' what is going on actually outside of it. Thus, visibility is a function of time-space, which entails active dialogic negotiation and production of still more private experiences of space and time, and I would add also here, production of what each one of us calls 'reality'. In relation to the visible, then, we can relate the complex visions, or day-dreams, that Violet experiences in *Jazz* when encountering

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[136] See M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*: *the Birth of the Clinic*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.

the girl and her baby sister in the street, or when thinking about Dorcas' picture on the mantelpiece. The restricted, confined personal time-space of Violet causes distortion of reality too.

On the other hand, sayability is connected to the concept of statement. As Deleuze points, in Foucault's analysis, "A statement always represents a transmission of particular elements distributed in a corresponding space. "[137]

This transmission is the core of the message-formation which is crucial for the articulation of the relations between objectified entities, i.e. it comprises Foucault's discursive domain. Once again, the inner 'eye' needs a tool to operate with the potential relations it perceives in reality. The statements 'happen' with multiple regularity, which produces the (much-hated) mathematical curve; the analysis of the properties of the curve then produces a feasible account for the changeability in historical strata.

The diagram embodies the mechanism of transmission of particular features by combining the descriptive scenes (visibilities) and statement curves (sayability). Thus, the diagram can be defined as a unit which comprises the form of content and the form of expression in itself. A particular example of a diagram will be discussed in the section that follows, but I would like to suggest here that literature too, and especially the novel as a genre, can be seen as a specific diagram, for it ultimately tries to harmonise the form of content with the form of expression, yet without isolating the reader from active participation in the message transmission. Needless to mention, the message transmission in the particular case will be, or can claim to be, both of aesthetic and moral value, while in everyday life the transmission can dismiss either one of these two values, or simultaneously both of them. In Bakhtin's words, then:

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[137] G. Deleuze, *Foucault*. p. 3

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world and enrich it as part of the process of creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers.[138]

Another important aspect of Foucault's concept of power is the so-called 'doubleness' of interaction between the forces. This aspect is a special target of counter-arguments in the feminist reading if Foucault. Where exactly is the apple of discord in this case? Since Foucault's theory is notoriously dedicated to the anonymous, yet very much patriarchal 'somebody', feminist critics attack his position for its potential deprivation of the gendered body from the discourse of power. Power, being operational in its function, is exercised by agents or actants who remain mere pawns, minute details in the vast picture of dynamic mechanisms. In this aspect, hard-line feminist critics argue, there is no place for positive development. Roy Boyne especially emphasises the oppositional relation between power and sexuality, and Foucault's corrupt [in his view] interpretation of it:

On this reading of Foucault's first book on sexuality, global struggle for liberation is to be replaced by resistance without principle...If everything is product of power, then nothing is redeemable, and all one can hope for are brief periods of respite... from the overwhelming sameness of it all. There is absolutely no space for difference in this, no possibility of self-control.[139]

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[138] M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope', p. 254

[139] R. Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida*. p.139

Similar views are expressed by Nancy Fraser and Toril Moi as well, but I think that there is much more in Foucault's theory than what comes on the surface as negative and deconstructive. My own (counter-)counter-argument, in favour of Foucault's reading of the power concept, is based on the understanding that the existence of bodies, actively interacting in the social space, already presupposes numerous modifications and varied exercise of power. Put in other words, as Lefevbre argues,

Before *producing* effects in the material realm (tools and objects), before *producing itself* by drawing nourishment from that realm, and before *reproducing itself* by generating other bodies, each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space.[140]

In *Beloved* and *Jazz*, both Sethe and Violet are engaged in such a double-bound production of self and space. From the plantation South to the run-down house at 124, Sethe is trying to produce 'herself' through, and out of, the tormenting memories of her child's murder. 124, and the ghost living in it, also produce in Sethe the space of 'home,' although a 'home' which is haunted by evil spirits in the eyes of the others. Even the formal structure of the novel employs circularity, of opening and end, as a way to emphasise return to roots, and the ability to find space in one's self to accommodate the past and the present at the same time. Violet in *Jazz* also tries to make space in herself: space for the sense of despair which dominate her existence in the City; it is also a space for the sense of loss and fear from the memories of her own suicidal mother. Ironically, without children of her own, and a life that seems stagnant, Violet is still an active

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140 H. Lefevbre, *op. cit.*, p. 170

'generator' of space, a person not simply in search of social niches, but one making such niches inside herself – to be able to accommodate again both the past and the present.

Another possible counter-argument is to be found in the aspect of 'doubleness'. For Foucault, in a Hegelian stance in this particular case, power relation is double-faced. It comprises the power to affect and the power to be affected. Again, the common sense perceives a potential opposition, in which the power to affect seems the 'active', domineering element; while on the other hand, the power to be affected seems passive and victimising. However, as Deleuze, points out in his reading of Foucault,

> [...] each force has the power to affect (others) and to be affected (by others again), such that each force implies power relations: and every field of forces distributes forces according to these relations and their variations. Spontaneity and receptivity now take on a new meaning; to affect and to be affected.[141]

This doubleness -- of spontaneity and receptivity -- is well beyond interpretations merely in terms of 'passivity' versus 'activity', for it does not necessarily presuppose *two* actants in *two* positions respectively. It is worth mentioning once again that, for Foucault, the subject position is one in constant flux and rapid changes, which may lead us to consider also the proposition that, in fact, the power to affect and the power to be affected might be -- and, indeed, they usually *are* -- performed simultaneously by the same actant. Thus, referring back to the fictional contexts of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, both Sethe and Violet are endowed with the extremely strong double power to affect and be affected: both characters, of course, are

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[141] G. Deleuze, *Foucault*. p.71

affected by the particular historical social changes, by the people who embody such changes in society, but Sethe and Violet have also the power to affect others with their own uncompromising will and straightforwardness.

If we accept this interpretation of 'doubleness' as nascent in a singular actant, we may conclude that the power to be affected (receptivity), and the power to affect (spontaneity), are actually the aspects which make us conceive of power as 'material'. In other words, receptivity is related to the *matter* of force, and spontaneity -- to the *function* of force. Of course, this is not to deny that the two positions might be occupied by two actants respectively, but then there is still no clashing opposition, for Foucault clearly states that,

... there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix -- no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body.[142]

Power and Social Law

In *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Foucault makes the following comment:

Let me offer a general and tactical reason that seems self-evident: power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.[143]

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142 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* /vol. 1/. p. 94

143 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. p. 86

For Foucault, law seems to be that very mask used by power to procure its purely disciplinarian function. The interpretation of the term 'disciplinarian' can lead to a common misunderstanding of the law machine, because, in the long run of history, common-sense wisdom somehow always relates discipline to violence.

Here is the place, then, to underline once more the fact that the disciplinarian function, in its broader societal aspect,[144] has nothing in common with violence. As I have mentioned already, the clash between forces exceeds violence. It is a clash generating new relations between forces, constituting and piling up actions upon actions. Violence, both in the physical and the psychological domains, is destructive *per se* -- it distorts and mutilates the integrity of body and/or soul. As such, violence is singular in its form, though, of course, in temporal terms it can be prolonged. On the contrary, power relations between forces are durational, since the very creation of these relations presupposes multiplicity and repetition of acts. That is how we can think of the undoubtedly 'significant,' yet isolated acts of violence which both Sethe and Violet perform in Morrison's novels. These acts of violence, although with a strong social repercussion, have more decisive psychological impact on the two women, rather than on the power mechanisms in society. The acts of violence, in the cases of Sethe and Violet, function as catalysts of internal transformation: through them, the characters are able to grasp the disintegrated pats of their selves, and to reach higher levels of spiritual knowledge. As Lefebvre, analysing the relation between space and time from a Foucaultian perspective, would comment,

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144 By 'broader societal aspect' I mean one unrelated to the principles of local legislation, which relegate a 'crime' to an (adequate) punishment in accordance with the regulations of Common Law, Criminal Law, etc.

The violence that is inherent in space enters into conflict with knowledge, which is equally inherent in that space. Power -- which is to say violence -- divides , then keeps what it has divided in a state of separation; inversely, it reunites -- yet keeps whatever it wants in a state of confusion. Thus knowledge reposes on the effects of power and treats them as 'real'; in other words, it endorses them exactly as they are. Nowhere is the confrontation between knowledge and power, between understanding and violence, more direct than it is in connection with intact space and space broken up.[145]

Foucault makes a subtle substitution of terms: instead of 'violence', he would use the term 'illegalisms'. Therefore, in his view, discipline is the formalised function of law, whose purpose is channelling of illegalisms. The normalisation of the marginal case/s/ is the main concern of a disciplinarian society, which tries to bring to the focus what is 'extra-ordinary', 'extra-positioned' in respect to the centre. Thus, the social ostracism in *Beloved* and *Jazz* is only an incantation of the inability of a disciplinarian society to channel two particular individuals into the general mould of passivity. Bluntly put, Sethe's sin at a point seems just an attack on the 'labour' relations in a slave-holding society, which does nothing else but hunts her; while some twenty years after the incident, the fellow members of the black community, again, although with a moral reference, ostracise Sethe for her unbecoming pride. Violet, on the other hand, is only too strange, even crazy, in the eyes of her community to be dealt with; yet she is only too invisible in the City to be also of any importance to the strata. Unless doing something outrageous as breaking up a social taboo, Violet, just like Sethe,

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[145] H. Lefebvre, *ibid.*, p. 358

is left alone by society, though always in a marginal position. The inability to channel Violet's behavior and socially 'compartmentalise' her are the signals for society to act upon Violet's very personal drama.

Thus, the bracing-up of social activities, the regulation of social participation of individuals, the close analysis of the social body as a whole, these are the normative goals of law. Since each historical strata requires specific diagrams, each diagram generates its specific constitutive laws. In this way we can speak of the Roman law, the English common law, etc. However, one has to take into consideration what Deleuze points in his analysis of power:

...discipline cannot be identified with any one institution or apparatus precisely because it is a type of power, a technology, that traverses every kind of apparatus or institution, linking them, prolonging them, and making them converge and function in a new way.[146]

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault makes a thorough analysis of the methods of exercising power through discipline in the Eighteenth century.[147] He considers three important discipline methods: distribution in space, which meant control through enclosing and special placements; ordering in time, which was temporal regulation and scheduling; and composition in space-time as a superior method, since it implied reaching a higher level of productive force relations, a sum total of the results from first two methods.[148] We can see all three methods utilised in the Panopticon -- a diagram in its essence, a model for exercising discipline upon

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146 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*. p.25

147 I must emphasise the fact that 'XVIIIth century' for Foucault is always the XVIIIth-century *Western* Europe. A significant part of *Eastern* Europe, however, namely the Balkan peninsular, at that time was under Turkish yoke - a fact which entails quite a different social picture.

148 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. p. 163

individuals, a place for control, not for punishment *per se*. If we refer back to the world of fiction, we will find that in *Beloved* and *Jazz* Morrison makes use of several such Panopticon-like places. In *Beloved*, 124 is most conspicuously a place with such qualities: on the one hand, it is the field of resistence for Sethe, since it offers territory for the needed clashes with the past; on the other hand, the house, which nobody else visits, is thus posited as a forbidden, evil place. In *Jazz*, Violet's flat is such a Panopticon, since the narrator chooses to give us intimate insights into Violet's life; however, such 'empowering' of the reader is quickly shattered, when Violet is in the larger Panopticon of the City. One would say that the City is Violet's own field of resistance: in fact, all her disruptive needs are spurred by and in the City, walking its streets, sitting in a café, meeting her customers in their homes.

The Panopticon is a knot of ultimate visibilities; it comprises in itself the form of content and the form of expression. This means that the form of content (the arrested individuals) is always visible to the authoritative body, which employs a specific form of expression (the normative behaviour) to generate and conduct the controlling message to the target-receivers. In other words, there is always a multitude of visible, marginal bodies and a central /some-/body in control of the vision perspective. Deleuze describes the Foucaultian Panopticon as,

> [...] the pure function of imposing a particular taste or conduct on a multiplicity of particular individuals, provided simply that the multiplicity is small in number and the space limited and confined.[149]

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149 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*. p. 72

Thus the power relations in the Panopticon diagram are embodied in the functional level of pure disciplinarity. This means that the sole function of discipline is to brace up the marginal to the purposes of the centre; the individual from the margin is engulfed by the mass of the centre – the centrifugal power law of physics is obviously at play in this case, since the diagram is above all a dynamic system, as it has been suggested already in the previous section, or as Boyne concludes:

The disciplinary society aims to make useful individuals, and the spread of the disciplinary mechanism from the margins of exceptionality [...] to the centre of things [...] derives from the effectiveness of discipline in producing utility.[150]

In short, the relation between power and law is also in constant flux: law is not a stable entity, a perennial regulator of human misbehaviour; on the contrary: to exercise its regulatory function, law administers illegalisms which are constantly redefined and reformulated in terms of dominant social 'normalcy'. That is why power and law, although invisible and constantly changing, can put up with manifestations of 'singular' behavior. In *Beloved* and *Jazz*, power and law are even reformulated by the characters Sethe and Violet, who give a more personal touch to these anonymous social concepts. For the two women try to bring to life an unexpected, dormant power in themselves: the power to be visible selves.

Power and Knowledge

[150] R. Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida*. p. 112

The interpretation of knowledge is another important issue which further illuminates Foucault's theory of power discourse. A zealous anti-Cartesian in his views, Foucault puts at stake the all-powerful *Cogito* which has been (predominantly) influential for centuries in the philosophic debates. What Foucault directly describes, or hints at, in his works is the Twentieth-century 'malady' of disbelief and uncertainty.[151] In the "Discourse of Language" he says:

The fundamental notions now imposed on us are no longer those of consciousness and continuity (with their correlative problems of liberty and causality), nor are they those of sign and structure. They are notions, rather, of events and of series, with the group of notions linked to these; it is around such an ensemble that this analysis of discourse I am thinking of is articulated, certainly not upon those traditional themes which the philosophers of the past took for 'living' history, but on the effective work of historians.[152]

The theoretical shift for Foucault is to be found in the way in which philosophy, or *archaeology* proper, interprets knowledge. The epistemological value is not to be found in the 'substance' any more, since substances belong to the non-discursive field. On the contrary, he examines critically the paramount value of social dynamics which, respectively, call for discursive practices of describing, rather than of explaining processes. Thus knowledge is to be understood as a dyad of formed matters (substances) and formalised functions (visibility and sayability). Maybe without such philosophical conotations, Morrison offers

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[151] An interesting reading in relation to this 'malady' is, for example, Karl Jaspers' *Way to Wisdom* and his existentialist theory as a whole.

[152] M. Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*, p. 230

similar view of knowledge, I think. In *Beloved*, Sethe's knowledge is richer and more mature at the end of the novel, with her personal acknowledgement of the existence - visible existence at that - of her body and soul. From the breeder of labour hands for the slave-holder to the proud individual, Sethe learns the meaning and value of being free and independent the hard way, through negotiations of space for memories from the past and living in the present. More 'substantial' than anything else is her love for Denver and for Paul D, more visible is her aging body, yet ageing in freedom. Violet, too, learns the hard way of being herself and living a life of love and hope with a beloved man, rather than letting go of haunting spirits from the past. In a way, Violet's road to knowledge differs from Sethe's exactly in the fact that Violet accepts the present for what it is, while Sethe accepts the present only for what have been in the past. We can account for such a difference on purely historical grounds, namely, that *Beloved* describes a story of approximately the 1880s when the notion of freedom has painful references to the period of slavery, while *Jazz* already tackles the 1920s with its modern concerns of time and human existence.

Foucault also distinguishes between knowledge in general (*savoir)*, and a particular corpus of knowledge (*connaissance*), which come together to characterise each stratum idiosyncratically, due to the specific power relations at work. Deleuze makes a very good point in relation to this, by concluding that,

If knowledge consists of linking the visible and the articulable, power is its presupposed cause; but, conversely, power implies knowledge as the bifurcation or differentiation without which power would not become an act [...]. There is no model of truth that does not refer back to a kind of power,

and no knowledge or even science that does not express or imply, in an act, power that is being exerted.[153]

Obviously, one cannot account for the differences in the corpora of knowledge, specific to each particular historical epoch, on the grounds of differences in thinking only. Because thinking is not an innate exercise of the mental faculty, but a 'materialisation' of thoughts which come into being under the influence of diverse power relations *outside* of the body and consciousness of the individual, or, as Aldous Huxley says, knowledge is a function of being, and when there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the amount and nature of knowing.[154] An appropriate reminder at this point will be to mention again the significant changes in the being of Sethe and Violet, causing changes in their knowledge too: after single acts of violence, both women have to live through much hardship, to pass through the psychological inferno of their own dramas, in order to come out stronger individuals.

Here is a place where we have to consider a basic distinction between 'exteriority' and 'outside' which Michel Foucault makes. For him 'exteriority' is the realisation of form; seeing and speaking, therefore, are forms of exteriority. 'Outside', on the other hand, concerns forces and the interactions between them. Power relations are not material, yet they invest meaning in formed matter. To quote once more Deleuze, who points out that,

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153 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 39

154 A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. VII

Between power and knowledge there is a difference in nature or a heterogeneity; but there is also mutual presupposition and capture; and there is ultimately a primacy of the one over the other.[155]

Thus we may conclude that the relation between power and knowledge is one of presupposition and dependency: the relations between forces are fluid and changeable, and still they influence the formation of stratified forms of knowledge (*savoir).* Hence knowledge, though operating with formed matter (substances), potentially has the characteristics of fluidity and changeability, which reflect the hierarchical import of visibility and sayability and their formalised functions in it. If we refer back to Heidegger, regarding the concept of knowledge in particular, we will see a similar way, in which he theorises the power/knowledge discourse:

... Truth and power, knowledge production and repression... are not external to each other (as they are assumed to be in the discursive practices of humanism) but continuous and complicitous with each other. To put it in terms of the figure informing this relation, the circle of truth/beauty/perfection is also the circle of domination.[156]

As a result, we have the limitless possibilities for verbalisation of knowledge, or, as Karl Jaspers succinctly concludes from a hermeneutic position, "All knowledge is interpretation."[157] In the open-ended processes of interpretation and utilisation of results we may seek possible ways for changes in the quality of thinking and incorporating knowledge in the power discourses. In *Beloved* and *Jazz*, such a verbalisation of knowledge, the

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155 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 73

156 W. V. Spanos, *Heidegger and Criticism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 148

157 K. Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 77

interpretation of existence, and the production of selves for Sethe and Violet show clearly that a significant change in the individual comes only as a result of active interaction with other characters in the novels. The importance of stating one's presence for the world, of claiming space in it, and developing a truly independent self, are, ultimately, goals for being in the world as it is. With its mechanisms of power and law, the world is far from being simply a 'place': never completely giving in to its disciplining functioning is the achievement of a life time, both for Sethe and for Violet.

Power and Sexuality, Power and Gender

A much-stated fact is that, there is no place left for squeamishness, or moralising, in the discourse of sexuality after Freud's seminal writings in psychoanalysis. Michel Foucault's own study, *The History of Sexuality* /1976/, is considered a classical reading, though one with ambiguous reputation among the numerous Foucaultian and anti-Foucaultian critics. Feminist critics of *The History* are just as diverse and contradictory in their opinions as are any other scholars. What are the main controversial points, then, and what is the relevance of Foucault's theory to Morrison's work?

First, critics often point at the fact that the focus of Foucaultian analysis falls short of being 'objective'. This follows from his extremely selective approach to sources and to the methodology of data interpretation. Second, the style of Foucault is quite far from the general idea of scholastic precision. This, again, is a result of his methodological approach to data interpretation, and is especially obvious in *The History*. Third and fourth? There are, of course, many other objections to the viability of *The History*, but I choose to concentrate only on the two contradictions mentioned above. I would like to illustrate how Foucault

incorporates the concept of power in the discourse of sexuality, and also why he turns into a target -- definitely not an easy one -- of negative feminist critiques. On the other hand, as I have mentioned previously, Morrison's female characters, Sethe and Violet in particular, are extremely strong, powerful women, actively producing new sense of selfhood through discourse. Having in mind the long history of objectification and sexual naturalization of black women in slavery, the transformed sexuality discourse is undoubtedly one of the ways to produce a liberated female subject in the Afro-American culture.

For Michel Foucault we, the "other Victorians,"[158] are obsessed with the discourse of sexuality, because it gives vent to our confessional aspirations to speak about what is deeply embedded into the individual consciousness and experience. But, on the other hand, this is an obsession which is controlled and disciplined, manipulated and braced-up by social power hierarchies too. In this way a person is both 'her/himself' and 'selfless' in the workings of the social machine, free to choose only what is offered: that means, the directed sexualised confession.

Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality.[159]

Yet the sexuality discourse is not a smooth variation of any other social discourse. It is both culturally and individually specific because, as Butler makes clear, the sexual difference is never just a function of material differences which are in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices.[160] Hence the difficulties in collaborating universal,

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158 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1

159 M. Foucault, *ibid.*, p.3

160 J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 1

encompassing formulae that will surpass the confines of the very private and will speak of the multiplicity in social practices. Due to its inherent uniqueness among myriad 'similarly' unique bodies:

> ... the body indeed unites cyclical and linear, combining the cycles of time, need and desire with the linearities of gesture, perambulation, pretension and the manipulation of things -- the handling of both material and abstract tools. The body subsists precisely at the level of the reciprocal movement between these two realms; their difference -- which is lived, not thought -- is its habitat.[161]

Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *Jazz* show us how the body of the Afro-American woman, with its inherent cultural markers, sometimes markers in the literal sense of the word as in the case of Sethe, survives against all historical odds, thanks to the amazing ability of the self to produce space for itself in an antagonistic, hostile society.

The main attacks on Foucault's interpretation of sexuality are related to his reluctance to name the agencies behind the power relations. It is true that Foucault's accounts of diagrams and strata are 'faceless' formations, as if striving after the institutionalisation of anonymity. There is very little agency at play in the case of the sexuality discourse just as well. Instead, the Foucaultian *narration* engulfs the actants and turns into a narrative of events. Thus the subject is altogether swept in the circuits of power; the subject is neither male, nor female, but a neuter figure in the big social machine.[162] It is obvious, then, why neither a 'first-wave' feminism, nor a 'second-wave' one, nor third- and fourth-wave feminisms to come, will

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[161] H. Lefevbre, *op. cit.*, p. 203

[162] Similarly, Bakhtin is an easy target due to his neglect of the 'sexualised actant/subject and the lack of emphasis on the importance of the gendered addressee. See, for example, L. Pearce's account in *Reading Dialogics*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994, p. 101

celebrate this particular issue of agency in Foucault's theory. For instance, Deveaux openly states that there is no use of Foucauldian politics of power, since

[...] both the paradigms of power and the treatment of the subject which emerge from Foucault's work are inadequate for feminist projects that take the delineation of women's oppression and the concrete transformation of society as central aims.[163]

However radical this opinion might sound, finally in Deveaux' words again, there is still some use in utilising resourcefully the power discourse, because, "Foucault's writings on power have a *certain* heuristic value for feminism."[164] [italics mine] Isn't it better, then, to balance what is *in* Foucault's theory against what is *not*, so that the feminist critical endeavour turns ultimately into a constructive one? In this respect I view Judith Butler's books *Gender Trouble* and, especially, *Bodies That Matter* more useful as a reading and an effective appropriation of Foucault's concepts from a feminist perspective.

In the realm of the sexuality discourse Foucault puts a special emphasis on the importance of the so-called 'bio-power'. He holds that bio-power is the one responsible for the regulation of the intensity of sexuality discourses, which is to say, it exercise a discursive disciplinarian function, rather than a purely behaviour-controlling one:

If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought

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[163] M. Deveaux, "Feminism and Empowerment: a Critical Reading of Foucault," p.223
[164] M. Deveaux, *ibid.*, p. 224

life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.[165]

Though the above excerpt very well illustrates the 'faceless' history which Foucault so often refers to, it is worth to remind ourselves that history is made by real people: the forces ruling societies, though anonymous on the surface, are forces directed by human aspirations and, often, by human vice. Therefore, if we accept the fact that women, or 'female agents', have had, and still have, a place on the historical scene, if not always a decisive say in power relations, then we can consider them/us as history 'makers' as well.

What is actually important in this consideration is the fact that, for Foucault, history is far from being locked between the hard covers of great books. Quite on the contrary, history is the dynamics of social relations which, inevitably, have power denominations of different value: in this way we can speak of sexual, gender, racial, class power relations, etc. In this respect, *Beloved* and *Jazz* can be considered 'enactments' of history as well: the chronotopes that inform our reading of the texts and the dialogism, in which Sethe and Violet are engaged, point to the specific polemic historicicity so characteristic of Morrison's novels.

What is the place of women in this dynamic system, then, and how does one's belonging to a particular sex and/or gender relate to it? I would like to quote Butler here who sounds very much Foucaultian in her interpretation of the 'construction' of gender and its relevance in the power discourses. As Butler argues,

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[165] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, p. 143

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is *not always constituted coherently or consistently* in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of *discursively constituted identities*. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.[166] [italics mine]

Butler points out the obvious truth that gender can hardly be isolated *per se* in the discourses of power. It is rather a constitutive element of the dynamic social system and, as such, is subject to the same dynamism which characterises the system. Hence, the gendered subject, whose literal acknowledgement is so cherished by feminist scholars, is actually constantly 'under construction', since there is never a 'full stop' between different strata in history. As I have already mentioned, Foucault prefers to emphasise that very fluidity of history as directed by power relations which are rather 'faceless' in society; hence his somewhat rush dispensing with the real social actants, which is so upsetting for feminists. However, Butler underlines the same characteristic feature of Foucault's concept, that:

Power operates for Foucault in the *constitution* of the very materiality of the subject, in the principle which simultaneously forms and regulates the "subject" of subjectivisation. [...] "Materiality" designates a certain *effect* of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or constituting effects.[167]

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166 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.3

167 J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 34

In this sense I find Butler's interpretation of the construction of the gendered subject closer to Foucault and his numerous followers: what she actually does, is to relate unobtrusively the 'story' of the construction of subjects as a process, thus shifting the focus from the outcome to the 'becoming'. Maybe this explanation accounts for her Foucaultian interpretation of gender:

Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.[168]

Morrison, as a woman writer, or maybe as a women's writer, is quite aware of this insight; in fact, what Butler has theorised in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Morrison has dramatised in her novels. Sethe and Violet are characters both "subjected and subjectivated by gender," in the sense which Butler puts in this phrase: what we read in the novels, are stories of two women who are able to invest the very tender, insecure 'I' of generations of Afro-American women with sense of selfhood. Becoming socially visible and speaking up the unspeakable pain of the past is a way out of historical and cultural obscurity.

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168 J. Butler, *ibid.*, p. 7

CONCLUSION

My two-year experience of reading and analysing *Beloved* and *Jazz* proved to be one of continuous 'enamoured' enchantment with probably the most challenging texts written by Toni Morrison until now. Working with secondary sources from diverse fields like Afro-American feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, narratology, structuralism, and phenomenology, showed me that there is an endless universe of inviting possibilities for interpretation of a single novel, or of a single episode in it, or even of a single word in an episode, depending on the particular angle of vision which a critic would choose. Such a conclusion, however, had its 'liberating' and 'obliging' effect on me: on the one hand, I was free to use this diverse set of critical tools and search for the best way ('best' in my opinion, of course) to interpret sometimes clashing concepts. On the other hand, the availability of all these tools reminded me once again of the necessity to further develop my own critical thinking.

I doubt a work is ever finished for its author, and I am absolutely aware of the potential in a more thoroughgoing analysis of both *Beloved* and *Jazz,* as well as the rest of Morrison's works. My approach to each book was based on a structuralist-narratological reading of (a) dominant concept(s) in the novelistic body, and a psychoanalytic interpretation of a female protagonist. Thus, the focus in *Beloved* is on story, memory, and pain, and on Sethe as the most challenging character, while in *Jazz* I was interested in the workings of narration and the 'jazzy' prose style, and in Violet in particular. The novels, however, proved to be much more complicated, with a very delicate balance among 'main' and 'secondary' characters, so that a new reading of the books can definitely pay adequate attention to the secondary characters as well. A detailed psychoanalytic approach to these novels can prove truly rewarding

for the grasp of the protagonists' fictional lives and their personal development into complex female charcaters. As the survey of literary criticism has shown, there are many plausible angles for psychoanalytic reading of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, because both novels are extremely open, although not necessarily easy texts for interpretation from such perspective.

The structuralist approach utilised in the thesis was based on my reading of Bakhtin's works on the novel. Although his writings go back to the 1920ies, and for some time his theoretical output was either misinterpreted, or flatly rejected by other literary scholars as an 'obsolete' one, I decided to use his concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and the chronotope, because they match very well a reading of novels by an Afro-American writer such as Morrison. In combination with some narratological tools, Bakhtinian concepts are, in my view, indispensable for an in-depth analysis of *Beloved* and *Jazz,* because they can account for the specificity of the Afro-American "speaking in tongues," which has been discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The reading of Morrison's novels has had a 'liberating' effect, as I have mentioned already. Due to her very artistic approach to narration and plot/*sjuzhet*, my attention has been driven in a new direction as well. Thinking about time, space, and power, prompted to discuss these concepts from the perspective of two of the greatest twentieth centuries thinkers -- Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault. At that point, I have included also Bakhtin in Chapter 3, for his innovative work on the chronotope gives clearer literary interpretation of time-space. I have decided to use the time-space as one unified concept, instead of separate time and space, because I think that in this way we can look at the multitextured world in a more comprehensive, thorough way.

What I have found also interesting, is that feminist criticism and feminist literature have worked in the same direction of interpreting time-space, and its importance in gender discourse. By utilising different tools and

different language from the language of Heidegger, Foucault, or Bakhtin, a diverse group of critics try to see what might be relevant to the feminist issues in the writings of these reknown philosophers. Still, Heidegger, Foucault, and Bakhtin are thinkers whose works, to various degrees, represent a real cosmic 'black hole' for the readers. Of course, one can be tempted to sum up in a nutshell their ideas and may well do this. However, what remains outside the symbolic 'shell' is always demanding proper attention for its relevance, as well as thorough rethinking in the context of postmodernity. Any interpretation of a single concept, and especially of the time-space and power concepts, will have to deal with an ever-widening scope of references, because their scholarly legacy is characterised by that same fluidity and flexibility of thought which they underline as inherent in both time-space and in power. I think that feminist critiques must strive after possible translations of these concepts into feminist contexts, rather than after tracking down lapses and shortcomings in their undoubtedly self-contained, singular theoretical outlooks.

The concept of power will be useful in the case of a new reading of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, because it will provide more flexible socio-historical frame for the complicated workings of the chronotope in Morrison's books than a utilisation of purely structuralist one. The application of this concept will be extremely useful for the analysis of her female protagonists, whose victimisation, historically marred by the shame of slavery, is also a source of empowerment which is in the core of their survival as human beings. In this sense, for me, both Sethe and Violet are embodiments of the empowered black woman.

Finally, my own position as a critic, analysing texts by an extremely gifted contemporary Afro-American novelist *about* Afro-American women from the past, targeted *at* Afro-American women in the present, made me reconsider my own position as an East European woman as well. What kind

of stories (novels) had made me what I am in the past, and what kind of stories I narrate in the present, and, hopefully, what kind of stories I will narrate in the future? These are the questions that do not require an immediate answer, for they require constant reconsideration on my behalf, I think, and personally speaking, Toni Morrison is one of these writers who spurred such reconsideration in me. Since the questions she asks in her novels, and, most of all, the lives of the female characters she depicts, transgress time, and pass across geographic borders and cultural barriers. Problems such as the bliss and/or the curse of motherhood, the importance of 'mothering' the self before anything else, in order to be a truelly fulfilled mother to one's child, as well as the need to create space, both internal and external, in order to survive socially – al these are extremely topical questions, which do not distinguish between the races. From a cultural perspective, Morrison's Sethe and Violet feel closer to me than many other ('white') female characters in literature, because of the acute awareness of my own rather marginal position in society, in my native country, Bulgaria, in Europe, and in America.

I still wonder, how many other writers, just as talented and profound thinkers as Morrison is, will appear in the long run, in order to spur more waves of reconsideration for nurturing different, richer selves in their readers? A cursory answer to such question, it seems, can be related to the endless possibilities and potential in the space-time conundrum, as well as the extraordinary, unexpected talents of many socially visible women.

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